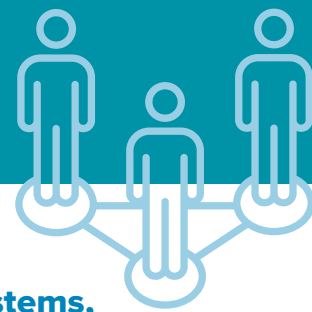


Trusted Networks: Understanding How People Influence Adult Learner (Re)Enrollment Decisions



Adult learners' college-going decisions are influenced and supported by their **ecosystems**, the close network of people in their lives who impact and are impacted by their educational choices.

AIR conducted an egocentric network analysis and 25 semi-structured interviews with adult learners and their ecosystem members to explore how Black, Hispanic, and Native American adult learners navigate their decision to (re)enroll in college and the role that family, friends, mentors, and others play.

We found that adult learners' ecosystems provide two key forms of support: **mindset-oriented support**, such as encouragement and motivation, and **capacity-oriented support**, such as help with logistics, finances, or childcare. Understanding these dynamics can help institutions and policymakers design better outreach and support systems that acknowledge the role of learners' communities in shaping postsecondary pathways.

What do adult learners' ecosystems look like?



48%

consult family members, such as parents, siblings, or extended relatives, **for guidance and encouragement**



25%

turn to their partners or spouses, who often help with **childcare, finances, and decision-making**



4%

of adult learners have **direct conversations** with faculty or staff before enrolling



Other types of relationships learners reported **included friends, members of church communities, and mentor figures.**



Learners' **ecosystems tended to be racially homogenous**: that is, Black adult learners' ecosystems tended to be largely made up of other Black people, and Hispanic learners' ecosystems tended to largely comprise other Hispanic people.



For more detail on the findings, please visit: <https://www.air.org/postsec-adultlearners>

How do adult learners' ecosystems influence their decisions about (re)enrollment?

73%

of adult learners received strong encouragement from their ecosystems

mindset-oriented support



- **Encouragement** and affirmation
- **Reframing** concerns
- **Belief** in their ability and success
- **Celebrating** small milestones to reinforce progress

capacity-oriented support



- **Application** guidance and transcript reviews
- **Financial planning** & tuition assistance
- **Childcare** and family support
- **Transportation** to and from campus

How can institutions use this information to better serve adult learners?



Address logistical barriers and reinforce college-going mindsets.

Provide targeted outreach and support that supplement the types of encouragement and support offered by learners' ecosystem members.

For example, offer clear communication about adult-learner specific options and opportunities, like scholarships or recognition of prior learning.



Place staff in roles that provide ongoing encouragement and logistical support to help adult learners persist.

Provide ongoing encouragement, motivation, and logistical support to help learners stay enrolled and complete their studies.

For example, assign dedicated advisors or coaches who can assist with balancing work, childcare, and study commitments.



Develop a positive reputation in the local community:

Foster positive experiences and interactions to enhance the institution's image. Familiarity with an institution, as well as word of mouth, are key parts of adult learners' (re)enrollment decisions.

For example, engage in community events and ensure faculty and staff are approachable and supportive, creating a welcoming environment for prospective learners.