

**RE
UP**



The New Priority in Higher Ed

FIVE STRATEGIES TO RE-ENGAGE
ADULT LEARNERS



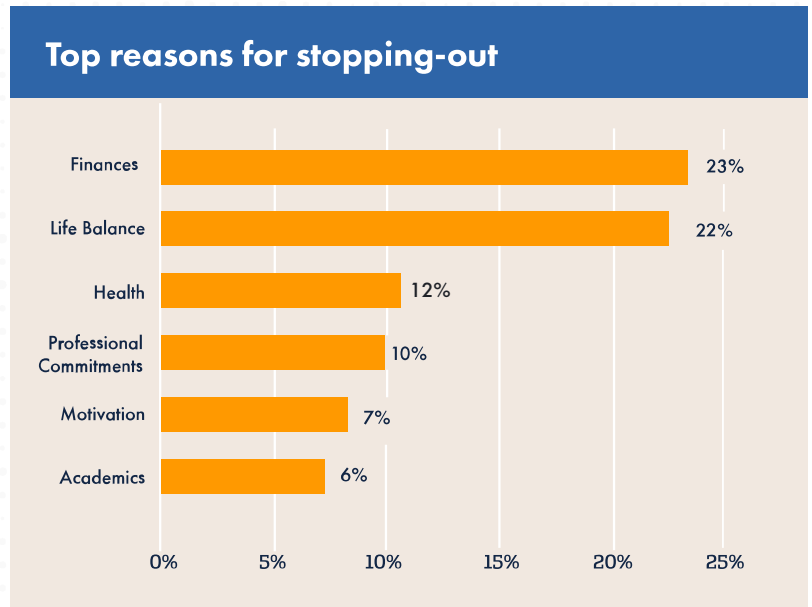


MORE THAN 43 MILLION AMERICANS have started college but not completed their degree. For context, that's more people than AARP has members. This population represents not only a vast pool of untapped potential. It's also a tremendous opportunity for institutions to reverse enrollment declines, improve retention, and align skill attainment with workforce opportunities.

Supporting adult learners' return to education isn't merely about goodwill—it's an enrollment strategy that benefits everyone involved. These learners are parents, professionals, and valued community members, ready to finish what they started. To meet their needs, institutions must understand what sets them apart from traditional students and how to smooth their path to completion.

Common misconceptions about adult learners

Adult learners and their experiences are greatly misunderstood. Many in higher education believe learners who stopped out of school lack academic readiness or motivation. However, ReUp data shows that isn't the case. In our database of over two million adult learners, 31% have a GPA of 3.0 or higher, and about 61% express a strong desire to return. The primary reasons for stopping out? Life circumstances like financial strain and balancing family responsibilities—not academics.



Every learner who stopped out—whether near completers, recent stopouts, or those who stepped away years ago—deserves the chance to transform their future as an adult learner.

It's also a myth that recent stopouts or near-completers are the only viable segments of this population to target for re-enrollment efforts. In reality, these learners account for just 12% of all stopouts. Millions more paused their education more than five years ago but are equally eager to return when shown a clear path forward. Every learner who stopped out—whether near completers, recent stopouts, or those who stepped away years ago—deserves the chance to transform their future as an adult learner. Reaching out to these individuals is a matter of providing opportunity and equity to those ready for a second chance.

For many adult learners, limited finances, intertwined with personal commitments, have the greatest impact on their ability to complete a degree. Through our work, we've learned that the top reasons learners leave higher education include financial pressures (named by 23%), lack of flexible course options, and limited awareness of re-enrollment resources. Understanding these realities allows institutions to tailor their approach to meet the needs of this population effectively.



Opportunities for institutions of higher education

Focusing on adult learners offers a clear opportunity for institutions to expand their reach and improve outcomes. Re-engaging this population can offset the impending enrollment cliff and create highly motivated, persistent learners who are eager to succeed.

Re-engaging this population doesn't just benefit colleges and universities—it strengthens communities, bridges state workforce gaps, and prepares learners for in-demand industries. Institutions that prioritize adult learners send a clear signal that lifelong education is valued, shaping a culture of opportunity and growth.

Five actionable strategies to re-engage adult learners

1 Personalize support and outreach

Adult learners need more than a one-size-fits-all approach. Success coaches like those at ReUp provide personalized, one-on-one guidance—working through doubts, identifying barriers, and supporting learners as they set clear goals.



Partner success: [Westmoreland County Community College](#) partnered with ReUp to support adult learners as they navigate the return to higher education. ReUp Success Coaches provided a personalized and human touch, emphasizing authenticity and empathy. This gave the school the bandwidth to develop offerings for returning learners, like advice on how to manage their time while facing competing priorities and connecting in- and out-of-class experiences through improved co-curricular activities.



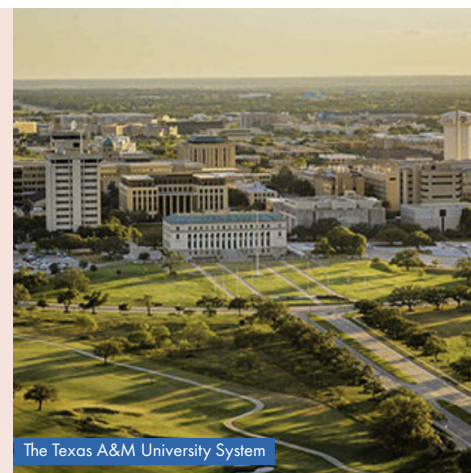
Westmoreland County Community College

2 Reduce financial barriers

Debt forgiveness, childcare support, and transportation assistance can be life-changing for adult learners. Highlight these benefits clearly to ensure re-enrollment feels both feasible and attractive.



Partner success: Through its work with ReUp, [The Texas A&M University System](#) decided to eliminate application fees for re-admitted learners at many campuses. More scholarships are being offered specifically for adult learners coming back, and a handful of universities in the system have secured additional state grants as a result of ReUp’s research and findings on re-engagement.



The Texas A&M University System

3 Simplify the re-enrollment process

Streamlined applications, clear credit transfer policies, and responsive communication are critical. Adult learners need enrollment processes that accommodate their busy schedules and minimize red tape.



Partner success: As a result of ReUp's feedback-driven recommendations from adult learners, [Old Dominion University](#) (ODU) streamlined its application process. The school provides ReUp-coached learners with academic advising before admission (i.e. unofficial transcript audits), a free online application for returning learners, and allows registration within a few days of the term's start date. In addition, ODU does not require essays, letters of recommendation, or retesting.



4 Redefine flexibility in learning

Flexible schedules, including options for night classes, hybrid modalities, and rolling start dates, make education accessible for those juggling jobs and families. Institutions that design programs around these considerations will stand out.



Partner success: Through its partnership with ReUp, [Saginaw Valley State University](#) learned that adult learners trying to get back into the flow of higher education prefer to concentrate intensively on one course for seven weeks, and then enroll in another one, rather than having their attention split between two courses for 14 weeks. In response, the school launched a pilot program that allows adult learners to register for a course mid-semester.



5 Collaborate statewide for broader impact

State-level coordination among institutions can amplify outreach efforts, creating scalable solutions and large-scale impact. Centralized tools and targeted campaigns can connect with long-absent learners at unprecedented levels.



Partner success: ReUp's collaboration with the New Jersey Office of the Secretary of Higher Education exemplifies [the power of a statewide effort](#). Working with 22 institutions, ReUp has outreached 280,000 adult learners since April 2023, leading to more than 13,500 re-enrollments and over 1,400 graduations. This initiative has recaptured an estimated \$74 million in tuition and is expected to contribute an estimated \$128 million to the state's economy through taxes and consumer spending in the first year after those who re-enrolled graduate.



A closer look at one adult learner's success

[Tonya Dion Mitchell's](#) return to higher education shows how the right guidance at the right time can reignite a learner's potential and transform their future. For years, raising her family and running her own business took precedence over finishing her degree. But Tonya never gave up on her dream of a career in accounting.

With the support of her ReUp Success Coach, Tonya found the encouragement she needed to return to college. "My Success Coach helped me see that going back to school was really possible," Tonya explained. Her coach provided guidance and check-ins to keep her motivated, navigate the complexities of returning to school, and establish consistency in her academic pursuits.

Tonya's return to college while managing her commitments is a testament to her perseverance and the power of personalized support. "There were times when it was tough," she admitted, "but knowing someone was in my corner made all the difference." Today, her diploma is a badge of honor—a symbol of her dedication, grit, and the support that helped make it all possible.



"There were times when it was tough, but knowing someone was in my corner made all the difference."

An institution's outreach and re-enrollment efforts lead to key policy changes

Saginaw Valley State University (SVSU), a ReUp partner, faced challenges re-engaging stopout adult learners. Efforts were fragmented, relying on advisors across departments to call or email students with little success. That's when they partnered with ReUp—and the results were striking.

Within just two months, SVSU saw an impressive 23% increase in re-enrollments. Using data ReUp provided, they identified why students left and strategized ways to bring them back. To date, SVSU reports \$3.3 million in recovered tuition, 474 returning learners, and 158 graduates.

SVSU implemented significant changes inspired by this partnership, including flexible degree pathways, accelerated scholarship timelines, and innovative pilot programs for coursework. These shifts not only made re-enrollment accessible but also fostered a stronger sense of belonging for adult learners.

Ken Fettig, Vice President for Enrollment Management for SVSU, sums up the school's commitment to adult learners: "We are investing in their future. Every policy change, every dollar in scholarship funds, is a testament to our unwavering support and belief in our students' potential."

[Read the full story](#)

ReUp's Impact at SVSU

\$3.3 million
in recovered tuition



474
returning learners



158
graduates



The path forward

Putting adult learners at the center of enrollment strategy goes far beyond boosting numbers. It's about creating opportunities for individuals, building stronger communities, and driving real economic growth. Start by taking a fresh look at your policies—what's working and what's creating barriers? Partnering with experts like ReUp can help you uncover innovative, scalable solutions that truly work. Together, we can make a lasting difference for adult learners, helping them succeed while positioning your institution as a leader in modern, inclusive education.