

# Adult Learners' College Access & Choice Process: A Literature Review

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## ABSTRACT

Higher education has experienced a shift in the demographics of undergraduate students as the enrollment numbers of adult learners continue to increase. The college access and choice processes for these students are different than those of traditionally-aged undergraduate students. Moreover, adult learners may face certain barriers to higher education, primarily associated with their multiple responsibilities and competing priorities. Researchers have developed models that explore college access and choice with limited research on the processes for adult learners. Higher education leaders must adapt their practices to intentionally focus on increasing access for adult learners. The literature review will provide several models for better understanding the college access and choice processes for adult learners.

*Keywords:* adult learners; nontraditional students; college access; college choice

## AS GENERATIONS CHANGE, COLLEGE STUDENTS CONTINUE TO HAVE VARYING NEEDS AND FACE

different challenges that motivate higher education professionals to rethink the practices that best serve those students. The demographics of U.S. undergraduate students are changing. Undergraduate students of the 21st century represent a new reality, where nearly 37% are over the age of 25, twenty-four percent have children or dependents, and 40% attend college part-time while working full-time and fulfilling other responsibilities (Lumina Foundation, 2019).

College choice is the long-range and multi-phase process of deciding whether and where to attend college (Mwangi, 2015). Whereas college access is the ability to engage in college going as impacted by social structural factors, such as societal inequities, educational institutions, and policies (Mwangi, 2015). Both are critical factors for adult learners in attending postsecondary education. Adult learners and nontraditional students consider specific criteria when deciding whether to

attend college and where they will go. They also face barriers to accessing higher education that often exacerbate the student's anxiety around choosing the right college.

We sequenced this literature review to outline the significance of college access and college choice for adult learners, demonstrate flaws in existing research, and provide additional theoretical perspectives. We sought to synthesize findings in the existing literature, assess its strengths and limitations, and offer implications and recommendations for future research and practice.

## Significance

The definition of an adult learner or nontraditional student has been a source of discussion in research in recent years (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2022). There is some consensus that adult learners and nontraditional students are 25 years of age or older, who may be attending college part-time while employed full-time, holding many responsibilities, and having dependents, with varying ranges of professional employment and personal experience, from multiple generations (Thoms, 2001; EAB, 2019; Glowacki-Dudka, 2019). Thus, we use the terms adult learner and nontraditional interchangeably. In alignment with the research on adult learners, thirty-eight percent of all college undergraduate students are 25 or older, and the majority are working to support themselves through college, while 25% are also raising children (Lumina Foundation, 2020). Adults return to college for a variety of reasons. They might want to complete their degree, expand their career options, earn new credentials, or just continue learning (EAB, 2019).

Adult learners may struggle with college choice and college access; therefore, institutional support begins prior to their enrollment. The recruitment process signals the beginning of an educational journey and can be either encouraging or discouraging for adult learners. Adult learners possess established values that inform their decisions, seek immediate application of their learning, desire to demonstrate competence in applying the knowledge and skills they are obtaining, and lastly, value choice in what they are learning (Thoms, 2001). Adult learners seek different considerations from their traditional counterparts. They may look at factors such as flexible class schedules, financial support or aid, and childcare offerings on campus to determine which institution supports their needs as a student (Leggins, 2021). One of the most prominent challenges adult students face is college expenses; researchers have noted that recruitment methods should focus on affordability, financial assistance, and long-term financial planning (Leggins, 2021).

The college choice process, the process by which students decide whether and where to attend college, has been a common framework for understanding why someone pursues higher education and where they attend college (Bergerson, 2009; Iloh, 2018). As the profiles of undergraduate students change and adult learners become the norm in postsecondary education, the dominant model, Hossler & Gallagher's (1987) College Choice Model has become outdated (Iloh, 2018). Several scholars have proposed new college choice models that accurately reflect undergraduate students' current demographics. The Ecological Model proposed by Iloh (2018) focuses on the individual student and their college-going behavior that ultimately result in a college decision. A Distance Learning College Choice Model was proposed by Lansing (2017) to uncover students'

decisions to enroll in a nontraditional, distance-based degree program. The Rational Choice Model has also been used to understand for-profit and community college choices (Iloh & Tierney, 2014). Iloh and Tierney (2014) suggested that the rational choice model could be used to explain college choice for all students by exploring the values and considerations that uphold college-going decisions. The literature summarizes multiple college choice models, yet the changing demographics of undergraduate students requires institutions to take a multifaceted approach to attracting and enrolling students.

Analogous to college choice is the issue of college access. How and why students choose their institution is imperative to framing scholastic understanding of access, equity, and success outcomes (Iloh & Tierney, 2014). The challenges that students face during the transition to college may influence whether they attend at all, as well as the timing of enrollment, choice of institution, method of finance, and the pace of progress toward a degree, which ultimately can influence students' likelihood of graduation (Page & Scott-Clayton, 2016). Financial constraints are a significant barrier to accessing higher education through the high costs of education, limited financial aid, and difficulty navigating the financial aid process (Page & Scott-Clayton, 2016). The complexity of accessing bureaucratic postsecondary education systems also presents barriers to college for many students who lack the cultural capital to adequately navigate those systems (Page & Scott-Clayton, 2016). Researchers find that streamlining college access is a vital first step for college student success and economic mobility (Lumina Foundation, 2020).

Historically, research about adult learners focused on andragogy and strictly defined adult students by a specific age category (Kasworm, 2018). There has been a substantial amount of research in the past five years on adult learners in higher education. However, few researchers have centered their inquiry on college choice and access. There remains a gap in the literature on college choice and college access for adult learners and other nontraditional undergraduate students. EAB (2019) expressed the need for increasing adult learners' recruitment initiatives because studies show that from 2025 to 2029 the college-age population is expected to decline by nearly 15 %. This decline of around 100,000 students could lead to significant financial loss in colleges and universities and further trickle down to a decrease in the number of qualified workers (Leggins, 2021). Increasing student enrollment is critical for the nation's economy and future (Lumina Foundation, 2020). As such, adult learners could help fill the gap created by the declining number of traditionally-aged college students (Leggins, 2021). We will herein review the literature and recommendations for future research and application to practice.

## Research Methods

For this literature review, we examined adult learners as a unique population in higher education with distinct needs that require intentional effort and focus to increase their access to higher education. The literature included in this review was selected based on the year of publication. We narrowed our search to publication dates from 2011 to 2023, with some outliers prior to 2011 included if they seemed highly relevant to the topic and contained pertinent information. We also explored the critical elements and factors adult learners consider when selecting an institution. To locate appropriate information related to adult learners in higher education and college choice and access, we used keyword searches in Google Scholar and several databases, including ERIC

(EBSCO), Academic Search Ultimate, and ProQuest Dissertations and Theses. We began searching for *adult learners* or *adult students*; or *non-traditional* or *nontraditional students*; and *college choice* and *access*. The searches provided substantial information directly pertaining to adult learners in higher education.

Much of the literature we reviewed focused on the characteristics of adult learners and nontraditional students and addressed the issues of college choice and access for these populations. The research on adult learners also addressed engagement, motivation, support programs and services, and policies aimed at nontraditional students. We also compiled college access and college success research in general. The college access research primarily addressed the barriers to access and policy responses. College choice literature centered on models for college choice, as well as how college choice impacts specific populations, including distance learners and students attending community colleges and for-profit institutions. Furthermore, we explored the intersections of adult learners' college choice and adult learners' college access. The research on adult learners and college access focused heavily on the barriers to access for adult students, while the research on adult learners and college choice was more positive and focused on motivations to pursue postsecondary education. There was another set of literature we examined with a broader focus on adult degree programs and adult learner perceptions of higher education. Table 1 notes the complete search terms, including alternate words and phrases utilized, along with the number of articles included in this review for each search term.

Table 1

*Complete Search Terms*

Keyword	Complete Search Term	Number of Articles in Review
Adult learners AND	Adult students or nontraditional students or non-traditional students	13
College choice		7
College access		6

## Adult Learner College Choice

Adult learners have a variety of circumstances in life that lead them to their pursuit of a degree. Reasons may include military service; career change, growth, or opportunity; financial resources; and previous academic achievement (Leggins, 2021). Adult learners are encouraged to conduct extensive research on their desired institution to assess if the available resources and services will meet their unique needs (Leggins, 2021). In general, the availability of desired programs or majors, days and times that classes are offered, locations of courses, cost, and faculty reputation for high-quality teaching are the most important college choice criteria for adult learners (Broekemier, 2002). Adult learners want to know their degree will improve their overall life, career progression, and salary prospects (Leggins, 2021). Students want to know that their degree is valued and worth their time, money, energy, and commitment. Consistent worries or constraints on students' college choice include cost, other aid, community and family support, and reputation (Han, 2014). Today's students often struggle with the burden of many responsibilities and stressors, while

receiving little to no financial or emotional support (Lumina Foundation, 2020). Furthermore, adult learners often identify with an underrepresented socioeconomic background (Webber, 2014). The experiences and challenges of adult learners are prominent in their college choice decision.

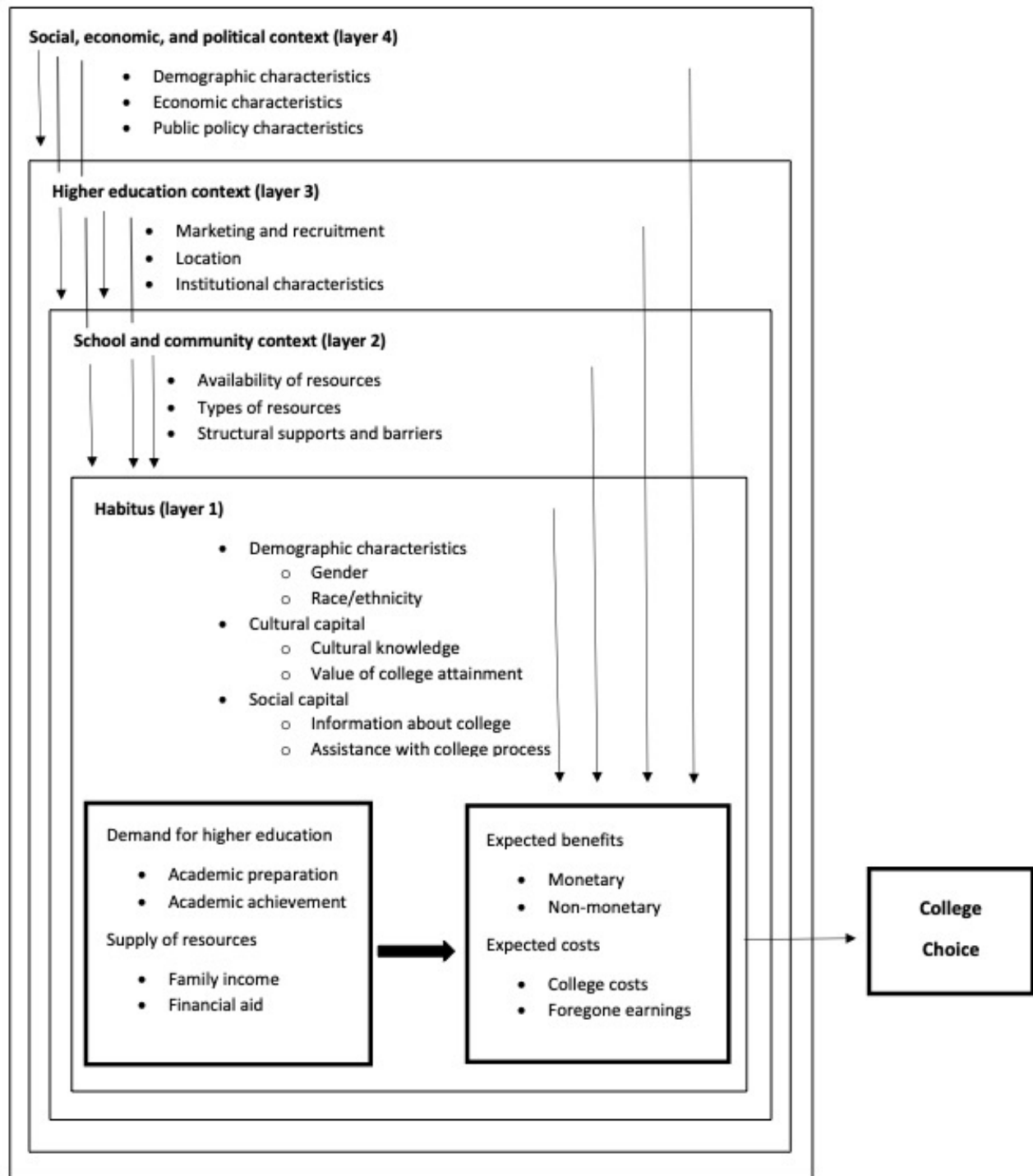
There are numerous models designed to explain the college choice process of undergraduate students, including Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) College Choice Model, Perna's (2006) Model of College Choice, Iloh and Tierney's (2014) Rational Choice Model, Lansing's (2017) Distance Learning College Choice Model, and Iloh's (2018) Ecological Model. While Hossler & Gallagher's (1987) model was seminal, many higher education scholars consider it dated. Perna's (2006) model is more contemporary and comprehensive, as it considers context. Further, Hossler & Gallagher's model was guided primarily by white students; therefore, more recent models are needed to reflect the demographics and experiences of today's college students.

College choice is influenced by many different factors for adult learners. Dominant perspectives on college choice have typically fallen into two categories: an economic perspective or a sociological perspective (Perna, 2006). Perna's (2006) conceptual model, drawn from both economic and sociological approaches of previous models, examines college choice with a focus on comparing the anticipated benefits with the expected costs, while simultaneously addressing social stratification concerns (Perna, 2006). The model (Figure 1) describes college choice in four layers including: (1) the individual's habitus; (2) school and community context; (3) the higher education context; and (4) the broader social, economic, and policy context (Perna, 2006).

The layered approach provides a foundation for future models that supports and centers adult learners. Contextual layer one, habitus, is focused on an individual's demographic characteristics, cultural capital, and social capital (Perna, 2006). Layer two is related to school and community context such as the availability of resources, types of resources, and structural supports and barriers (Perna, 2006). The higher education context, layer three, provides a look at marketing and recruitment, location, and institutional characteristics that influence a student's college decision (Perna, 2006). Campus location and proximity, hours of operation, and accessibility are top considerations when selecting an institution (Broekemier, 2002). Lastly, layer four is the social, economic, and policy context which also focuses on demographic, economic, and public policy characteristics (Perna, 2006). Economic policy may drive the higher education enrollment of adult learners. Adult students are primarily motivated to pursue higher education for economic reasons such as seeking career advancement, securing a new or different job, and future job and financial security (Broekemier, 2002).

Although college student demographic data is available, much of the information on adult learners was gathered in the 1970s and 1980s. It may no longer be as relevant in a higher education environment that has rapidly changed over the past decade (Harris and Brooks, 1998). Researchers have addressed the direct importance of college choice criteria for traditionally-aged students; however, more information is needed to focus on the importance of the college choice process specifically for adult learners (Broekemier, 2002).

Figure 1

*Perna's (2006) Model of College Choice*

Adult learners may need the stimulation and support of fellow students, and personal contact with both fellow students and teachers (Warner and Dishner, 1997). Swenson (1998) found that the days and times classes were available, and the availability of professors was important to adult students. Because adult learners juggle multiple roles in life and often cite financial and family responsibilities as major concerns, they want and need flexibility in instructional and advising schedules. They may also require considerable contact and reassurance from college faculty and staff to be successful (Saunders & Bauer, 1998). Due to their varied priorities, adult students attending two-year institutions make significantly different choices about college than their counterparts at four-year institutions. They may also require intentional support services when first accessing higher education.

### **Adult Learner College Access**

Higher education has served adult students since the beginning of the United States (Kasworm, 2018; Thelin 2004). From the late 1800s to the early 1940s, adult education continued to grow with the development of extension programs, continuing education, and evening campus offerings (Kasworm, 2018). The G.I. Bill, introduced in 1944, significantly impacted adult education when it created opportunities for access and enrollment for returning World War II veterans as adult learners (Olson, 1973). The period from the 1960s to the 1990s saw more growth in programs targeted at adult students (Kasworm, 2018). A key innovation during this period was the creation of adult-oriented policies, programs, colleges, and assessment-based and competency-based degree programs (Kasworm, 2018). More recently, additional programs have been designed to increase access to higher education for adult learners. Innovative practices and strategies such as prior learning assessment (PLA) for credit and technological advances have created a new set of access possibilities and learning formats (Kasworm, 2018).

### ***Barriers to Access and Success***

Adult learners face barriers to higher education that many traditional undergraduate students do not. Time and financial constraints are cited most frequently as barriers to higher education for adult learners (Gast, 2013). When accessing higher education, adult learners generally try to minimize the barriers associated with their responsibilities related to family, careers, and social commitments, including childcare, scheduling conflicts, and transportation issues, as well as a general strain on their time and finances (Broekemier, 2002). Previous research on adult learners has created several classifications of barriers (Osam et al., 2017). Ekstrom (1972) classified barriers as institutional, situational, and dispositional. Situational barriers include issues with family, childcare, work, finances, and transportation (Osam et al., 2017). Challenges in navigating the educational system, such as applying for financial assistance, applying for college admission, and a lack of representation in the higher education space are examples of institutional barriers (Osam et al., 2017). Adult students may also suffer from dispositional barriers, such as low self-esteem, low self-efficacy, anxiety, fear about returning to college, and feeling out of place or excluded on campus (Osam et al., 2017). Adult learners may struggle to feel a sense of belonging or doubt their ability to succeed academically.

Institutions have responded to these barriers adult students face by creating and implementing policies, practices, and programs to support this unique population. Online and hybrid degree programs appeal to adult learners because they reduce the barriers of time and finances (Gast,

2013). Issuing transfer credits, offering prior learning assessments, and partnerships between community colleges and four-year institutions create pathways to degree completion and enable access (Gast, 2013). Additionally, specialized services for student veterans, first-generation college students, and students with disabilities can also meet the needs of adult learners and other nontraditional students (Gast, 2013).

Collom et al. (2021) designed a study focused on understanding a group of nontraditional adult learners who used The Tennessee Reconnect Grant experiences. The data was collected over two years of interviews with 23 individual grant recipients to understand their educational experiences, the impact of receiving the grant, and their transition to student status, using Schlossberg's Transition Theory as a theoretical framework (Collom et al., 2021). The study revealed similarities among adult learners; many identified as low-income and first-generation who struggled through life circumstances that increased barriers at graduation or beginning college, and who stopped attending at some point throughout their journey (Collom et al., 2021).

Another emergent theme of the study explained adult learners limited access to support including but not limited to financial aid and relational resources and support. Lacking these resources can contribute to students' decision not to return to college (Collom et al., 2021). Therefore, lowering the cost of college could benefit students with lower socioeconomic status (Collom et al., 2021). Tuition-free initiatives have great potential to increase college enrollment (Collom et al., 2021). Financial policies and practices appear to be in opposition to current economic trends associated with college affordability intended to close gaps in college choice (Perna, 2006). Perna (2006) argued based on her research that programs, policies, and practices must address the persistent gaps in college access and choice across diverse student populations. Higher education should be accessible to all to ensure the state and national levels of benefits of education are reached (Perna, 2006). Future changes in demographics and current trends in higher education finance highlight the need for additional theory and research on access and choice (Perna, 2006).

### ***Global Implications***

Additional challenges to college access occurred in March 2020 as individuals navigated the global COVID-19 pandemic. Lockdowns created a unique opportunity for higher education professionals to assess best practices. Federal and State quarantine orders forced college and university leaders to intentionally reconfigure teaching and learning to occur in virtual spaces. Instructors were able to support some students' learning by shifting courses online for remote instruction (Leggins, 2021). Further, it forced institutional leaders to acknowledge and address the noticeable disparities and inequities for students who lack access to the technological equipment needed to succeed in online learning (Leggins, 2021). It also has provided opportunities for faculty and staff to encourage students to finish their degrees during this time (Leggins, 2021). Adult students navigated the pandemic by, yet again, balancing multiple responsibilities and competing priorities all while pursuing higher education.



## Limitations and Critiques

While the literature on adult learners is robust, it is imperfect and incomplete. The research on adult learners does not offer a singular definition of age demographics for this population. Some researchers classify nontraditional students as anyone above the age of 21, while others label adult learners as students over 25. The discrepancies in age classification cause educators to question who is considered an adult learner.

Furthermore, the literature on adult learner access is deficit-focused, emphasizing students' barriers. This deficit lens presents college access as a problem for the student rather than an issue with which institutional leaders should be concerned. The barriers to college access can be overcome and a successful transition to higher education is feasible.

Policy supports are one way to provide greater access to higher education to students who are on the margins. Policy interventions may indicate that higher education institutions support both access and completion for students, and the two goals may contradict one another when focusing on limited resources (Page & Scott-Clayton, 2016). When higher education is constrained by institutional resources, they are faced with a decision to serve more students by providing a lower quality of service or serving fewer students with higher quality academic opportunities and other services (Page & Scott-Clayton, 2016). Although Perna's (2006) conceptual model is an excellent dissection of factors of an individual's college choice process, there is a gap in the literature that needs to look at adult learners specifically. This discrepancy addresses the importance of this subpopulation's unique needs, which will require intentional research, policy, and practice. Additionally, much of the research on adult learners was deficit-focused and primarily centered on barriers. Future research should identify the institution's responsibility for creating a welcoming college environment where students of all ages can succeed.

## Recommendations for Practice

To best support adult learners pursuing postsecondary education, according to our review of relevant literature, we recommend implementing several practices. Institutions of higher education must be intentional and focus on increasing access for adult learners. This is accomplished through specialized practices and strategies aimed at adult learners, such as degree programs that may be accelerated to target adults and the awarding of credit for prior learning (Kasworm, 2018). Credit for prior learning is a term for the various methods higher education institutions use to evaluate learning that has occurred outside of traditional academic environments (Council for Adult and Experiential Learning [CAEL], 2023). Additionally, colleges and universities must better understand adult learners' goals and priorities. In doing so, institutions will be able to tailor resources, services, and programs to meet the needs of adult learners. Furthermore, they can target their marketing and recruitment efforts to attract older undergraduate students. Adult learners, their college choice process, and access to higher education should be at the forefront of higher education, given the current trends surrounding nontraditional and adult learner enrollment.

Although the literature on adult learners is robust, there is still a need for future research on this student population. Future studies could address adult learners and college choice, specifically

addressing the differentiated “products” of higher education. Leaders of the various types of post-secondary institutions might consider how they position themselves to attract adult learners. For example, institutional leaders might consider how they design their marketing and recruitment efforts to enroll adult learners and nontraditional students. As adult learner enrollment numbers increase, specialized support services are needed for these students that address their unique strengths and challenges and create an inclusive campus environment for them. We envision services that ease transitions, allow for academic empowerment, provide career connections, offer student support and equity, and address the affordability of college (Bertolini, 2022). These services must be grounded in research and intentionally designed to support the needs of adult learners.

## Future Research

Although useful, the present models of access and college choice are becoming outdated and are not centered on adult learners. There is a need for updated models that address factors influencing adult learners' college choice and the barriers to access. Future studies are needed to bring adult learner college choice and access models into the 21st century and more aligned with existing research on this student population.

## Conclusion

Adult learners are a unique subpopulation in higher education and require intentional effort and focus on increasing access to college opportunities. Older students will continue to make up a substantial percentage of the higher education student body; therefore, it is necessary to develop a greater understanding of their educational goals (Donahue & Wong, 1997) and the choice criteria most important to them. This increased knowledge will allow colleges and universities to attract and better satisfy adult students (Broekemier, 2002).

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