

Exploring post-secondary experiences for adult learners of color in Oregon

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Background & Context

- HECC Adult Attainment Goal
 - Eliminate disparities in postsecondary success rates for historically underrepresented students of color
- Literature review
 - Barriers to enrollment and retention
 - Interventions that support retention
- Research questions
 - How do adult learners describe the barriers they face in accessing higher education?
 - How do adult learners describe the supports/interventions that facilitate their education?
 - What are their recommendations for supporting educational access for adult learners from underrepresented communities of color in Oregon?

Background & Context: Today's college student

- 37% are 25 or older
- 42% are people of color
- 46% are first-generation college students
- 24% have children or other dependents
- 40% work full time
- 57% live independently
- 13% live on campus

Economic precarity

- 53% of families live at or below twice the poverty level
- 36% don't know where their next meal is coming from
- 68% graduate with student loan debt
- \$25K is the average student loan debt

source: Lumina Foundation (2019). *Unlocking the nation's potential. A model to advance equity in education beyond high school.*

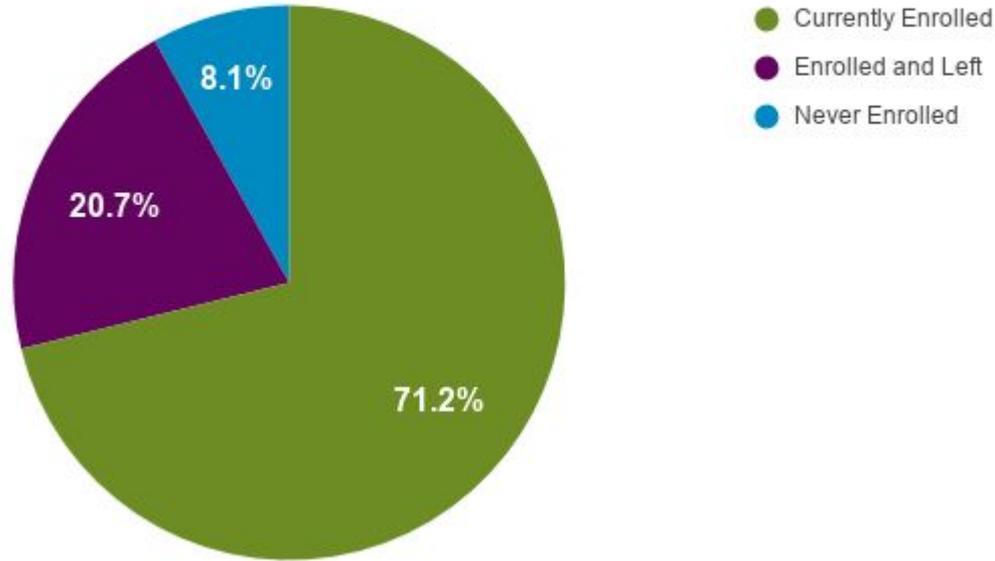
Methods

- Interviews & focus groups across the state
 - Lived experience and voices of people
 - Currently Enrolled, Enrolled & Left, Never Enrolled groups
 - Questions focused on experiences in college, future goals, messages from family/community about college, motivations for staying in school, recommendations
 - Thematic Analysis
- Recruitment efforts
 - Currently Enrolled: Institutional researchers and campus-based partners across the state--community colleges and 4 year colleges
 - Enrolled & Left: Started with IRs/campuses with limited success; community organizations, networks
 - Never Enrolled: Community based organizations and networks--non-profits, grocery stores, libraries, campuses, outreach to currently enrolled folks, word of mouth

Sample Overview: 111 total participants

Enrollment Status

Focus Group & Interview



Focus Groups: 39 (7 groups)

Interviews: 72

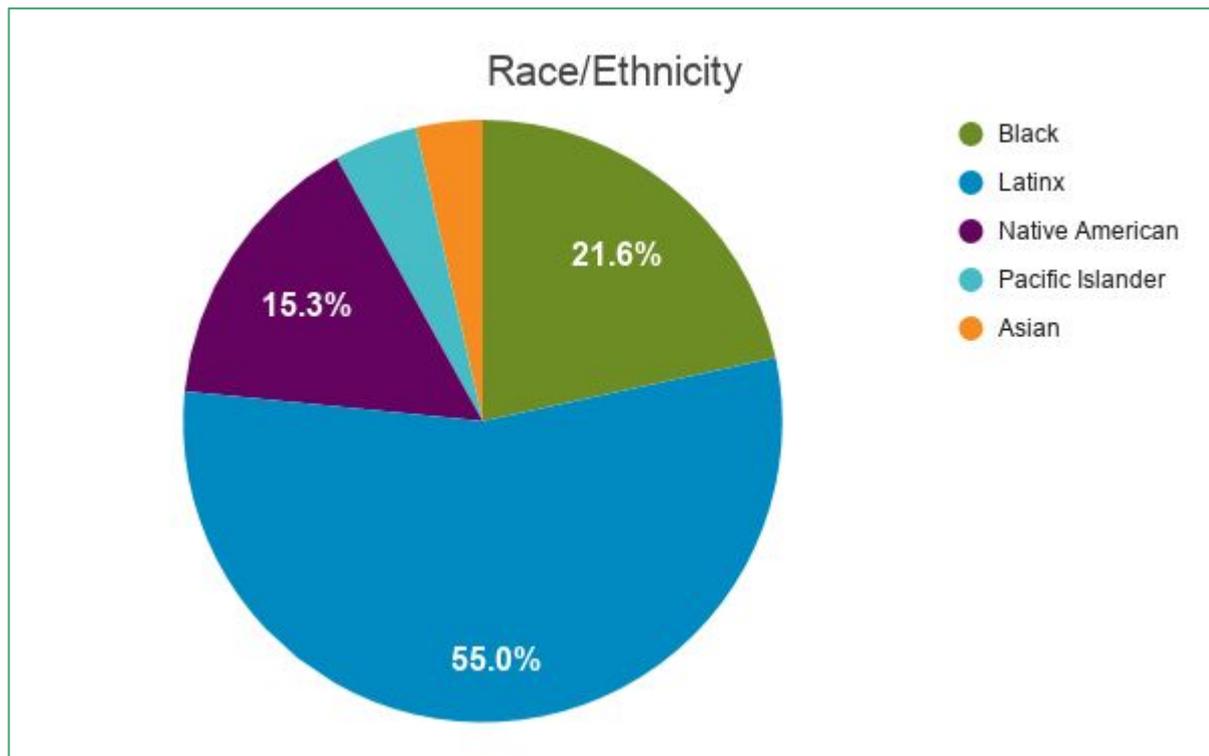
Enrollment Status: (number of participants)

Currently Enrolled: 79

Enrolled & Left: 23

Never Enrolled: 9

Sample Overview



Race/Ethnicity (numbers of participants):

Black/African American: 25

Hispanic/Latinx: 60

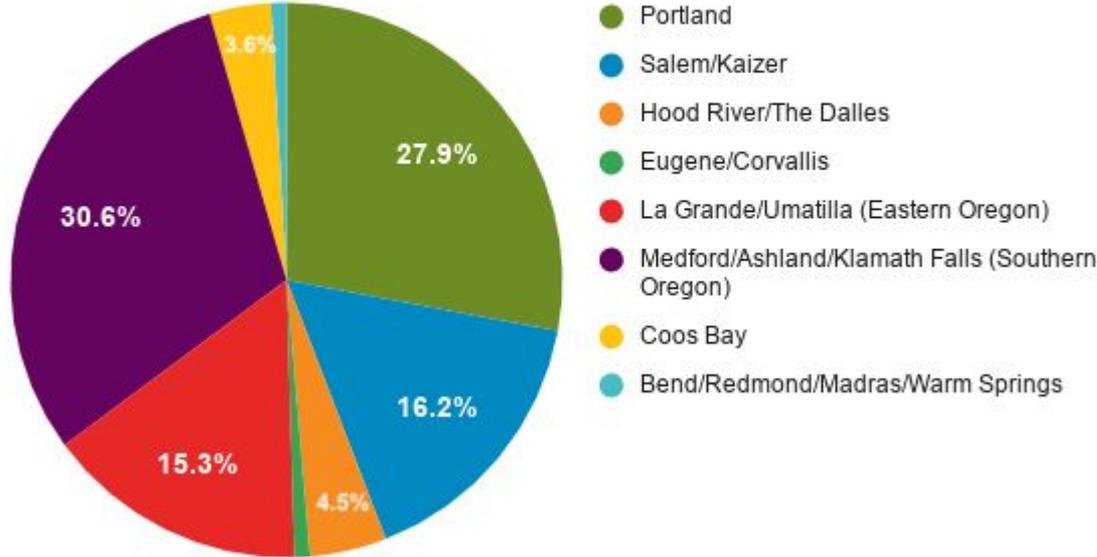
American Indian and Alaskan
Native: 17

Pacific Islander: 5

Asian: 4

Sample Overview

Geographic Area



Region (number of participants):

Portland: 31

Salem/Keizer: 18

Hood River/The Dalles: 5

Eugene/Corvallis: 1

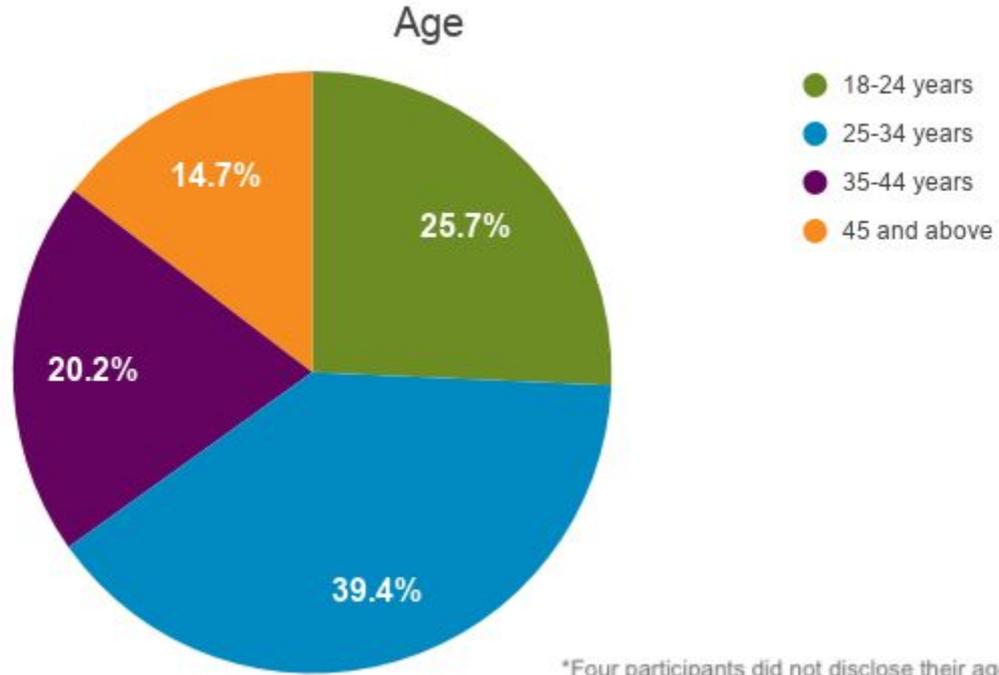
La Grand/Umatilla (Eastern OR): 17

Medford/Ashland/Klamath Falls
(Southern OR): 34

Coos Bay: 4

Bend/Redmond/Madras/Warm
Springs (Central OR): 1

Sample Overview



Age (number of participants):

18-24: 29

25-34: 44

35-44: 22

45+: 16

Sample Overview (continued)

- Gender
 - 74 women
 - 35 men
 - 1 non-binary
 - 1 no response
- Parental Status
 - 55 parents
 - 54 not parents
 - 2 no response
- Ability Status
 - 23 identify as having a disability
 - 81 no disability
 - 7 no response

Pathways

- Pathways to college and completion were often long, non-linear, and involved multiple institutions
 - Many who were currently enrolled had previously enrolled and left
 - Motivations to return to school often involved work or change in family system
- Never enrolled participants had varied pathways: access to training/professional development; jobs with promotional pathways; jobs that were available in their region
 - Mix of people who did still want to go to college and those who did not

Emergent Themes : Barriers

- Economic Barriers
- Social/Cultural Factors
- Institutional Barriers & Challenges
- Structural Oppression & Identity-Based Exclusion

Economic Barriers

- Managing Costs of School
 - Loans & Debt (and fear of it)
 - Hidden Costs
 - Difficult to access scholarships & financial aid
- Meeting Basic Needs
 - Lack of affordable housing, healthcare, food, mental health supports
- Employment
 - Working multiple jobs & long hours
 - Inflexible employers

Economic Barriers

“Money just started pouring out and I didn’t know where it was going ...there’s like hidden payments here and there. Like, I’d be like, oh, this is how much I have to pay for that class. And then when I start the class, I got all the books, then the teacher would be like, “oh, wait, there’s other stuff you have to get. And it’s not just like, oh, it’s a \$20 book or something like that. No, it was like a \$200 book, a \$100 book”

--Hispanic (and white) male, currently enrolled, Umatilla, age 24

Social/Cultural Factors

- Messages before College from Family & High School
 - Family messages: no messages, lack of information, “we don’t need to go”
 - Staying close to family
 - High School messages: tracking, messages about intelligence, college is hard
- Relational Losses
 - Leaving community/family behind
 - Balancing family time expectations
 - Family/partner who don’t get it
 - Need to prioritize family over school

Institutional Barriers & Challenges

- Advising and Mentorship
 - Lack of guidance
 - Poor advising/misinformation
- Navigating Campus & Academic Life
 - Hard to schedule with campus resources (i.e. writing center)
 - Workload, topics, and pacing of classes
 - Difficulty in figuring out credit transfer between systems
- Lack of Supports for Students with Children
 - Lack of affordable and accessible childcare
 - Lived experiences of managing school work with parenting
 - Change in pathways
- Lack of Community

Students with Children

Juggling work, school, work, homework. Even attending classes and taking care of them at the same time. With my son, I try to do my homework ... I don't want to pay a babysitter when I'm doing my homework, much more than I already have to do when I work. I work ten-hour shifts, so that's ... the babysitter is with him ten hours. So, I don't want to give him away even more than the time I can't spend with him.

So, I try to do my homework when he's around. But he just like scribbles all over my stuff, and tries to get on my computer and type stuff. He has erased a lot of stuff [laugh] that I've had to re-do. It can be a barrier at times...

--Hispanic/Latina woman, currently enrolled, Salem, 24 years old

Structural Oppression & Identity-Based Exclusion

- Lack of representation and reflection of BIPOC (faculty/staff & peers)
- Racism from peers
- Reduction in funding for culturally-specific campus programs
- Internalized oppression
- Tokenization
- Gentrification impacts quality of K-12 education for BIPOC
- Historical trauma

Emergent Themes: Supports/Interventions

- Economic supports
- Social/Cultural supports
- Institutional supports
- Programs and resources

Economic Supports

- Scholarships (including support to access, apply)
- Veteran's benefits or employer-paid schooling
- Grants
- Community college (lower cost)
- Work study, tuition support for on-campus work
- No-cost or low-cost textbooks

Social/Cultural Supports

- Access: pre-college experiences on campus
 - High school tours
 - Working on a college/university campus
 - Running Start or AP coursework
 - Helping a child enroll in college
- Family and friend support
 - Practical support (money, childcare, housing and basic needs)
 - Information and encouragement
 - Desire to be a role model for children, or help family
- Alignment between work and school
 - Specific career goals
 - Belief that college will lead to living wage employment
 - History (or present) of bad employment experiences
 - Interview practice, professional development
 - Internships and building social capital/network
 - Supportive employers
 - Seeing co-workers earn degrees

Social/Cultural Supports (continued)

- Individual strengths and community resilience
 - Education as a means of being heard and respected as a person of color
 - Education as the reason for family immigration (“families are depending on us,” and “I needed to be the one to break the cycle...go to higher education”)

“What keeps me in school is, one; as an elder, all of the other people of color around me. If I get disheartened or drop out--chances are, they will, too. And when you’re an elder in any branch of my culture, you have to live by a higher moral standard. And you have to bring that to the people that surround you, so they can see it.”

-Native American/Hawaiian woman, currently enrolled, Klamath Falls, age 64

Institutional Supports

- Institutional accessibility
 - Satellite campus/locations closer to home
 - Online options
 - Shorter program
 - Bringing in military or prior experience for credits
- Campus community and relationships
 - Smaller schools/low faculty-to-student ratio
 - Relatable faculty (especially in terms of age, race)
 - Advisors and mentors
 - Finding people from a similar background/community

Programs and Resources

- TRiO
- Campus resource centers (cultural, women's, veteran's)
- [Oregon Human Development Corporation](#)
- [Atmos Program](#)
- AVID
- [Senior Inquiry](#)
- [ACCESS \(Accessing the Cultural Capital Essential to Student Success\)](#)
- [Dress for Success](#)
- [Chemeketa Foundation](#)

Potential Supports for Never Enrolled Adults

- Institutional supports
 - Access to campus (e.g. ESL classes)
 - Assistance with enrollment, using scholarships
 - Interesting classes
- Social/cultural supports
 - With other English language learners
 - Imagining how others would see you with a college degree
- Individual and community resilience
 - Discovering talents/skills/abilities
 - Knowledge of community needs, seeing self as an advocate
 - Bilingual
- Economic and workforce development
 - Employer-paid trainings and certifications (e.g. community health worker, CNA)

Recommendations from Participants

What would make it easier for students of color to enroll and stay in college?

- Help with costs/financial supports: school & basic needs
- Community and support for BIPOC students
 - Increase diversity and representation of BIPOC faculty/staff
- Advising, mentorship, & guidance
- Education about college for students & families, including outreach and community-specific programs
- Early messages & recruitment of BIPOC for college (HS and before)
- Childcare support
- Non-degree options--certificates, courses, training

Discussion & Implications

- Today's students are juggling a lot: school in addition to work, parenting, and other responsibilities and stressors
 - *Structural and institutional supports that address complex student needs*
- Costs of education (and fear of costs) are a central barrier
 - *Ways to make college affordable and accessible, including addressing hidden costs, basic needs, access to scholarship*

Discussion & Implications (continued)

- Reflection and representation in college (and messages before) that affirm identities and create sense of belonging
 - *More faculty/staff of color and role models that reflect student population*
 - *Community and support systems on campuses for adult students of color*
- Accurate, culturally-responsive information for students and families about higher education
 - *Advising, mentorship, guidance that is wholistic and culturally-responsive /reflective*

Limitations and Future Research

- Geographic representation
- Recruitment of never enrolled adult learners
- Further exploration of specific racial/ethnic groups and/or geographic areas
- Gendered analysis of experiences
- Further exploration of experiences of Never Enrolled
- Campus Climate (i.e. microaggressions)
- Impact of current higher education funding models on institutions

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