

Simplifying the Enrollment Process for Adult Students

ideas

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Setting more adults on the path to obtaining a college degree

Many adults who intend to enroll in college are derailed by seemingly small yet meaningful challenges. By clearly communicating the enrollment process to prospective adult students and providing step-by-step support, colleges and universities can help more students who enroll as adults obtain college degrees.

Summary

For many people, earning a college degree translates to better quality of life. Compared to those with just a high school diploma, adults with a bachelor's degree report higher income¹ as well as greater job satisfaction and better health outcomes.² And the benefits of a college degree go beyond the individual: a skilled, educated workforce is essential to maintain economically strong and secure communities. Yet across the United States, there are 90 million working aged adults who hold only a high school diploma, as well as 39 million adults who attended college but did not finish.³

Nationwide, 20% of adults without a postsecondary degree say they intend to enroll in college but many of them never make it to the first day of class.⁴ Although some of these prospective adult students do not enroll for personal reasons, research shows there are many other subtle, sometimes surprising barriers that can interfere with the enrollment process.⁵

With generous support from Lumina Foundation, ideas42 set out to use insights from behavioral science to identify and address these enrollment barriers. We partnered with Fayetteville State University (FSU), one of North Carolina's four-year Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), to investigate why some of FSU's admitted military-affiliated adult transfer students were not enrolling, and piloted several design solutions to help these adults complete the

Highlights

- ▶ Prospective adult students—especially those who are military-affiliated—face unique challenges in the college enrollment process.
- ▶ Providing a personalized enrollment road map, sending text messages to remind applicants of important enrollment steps, and offering information about flexible course offerings are low-cost and impactful ways to improve the enrollment process.
- ▶ These solutions can be adapted to support the wider prospective adult student population, leading more people across the United States toward a college degree.

¹ Barrow, L., & Malamud, O. (2015). Is college a worthwhile investment?. *Annu. Rev. Econ.*, 7(1), 519-555.

² Ma, J., Pender, M., & Welch, M. (2016). *Education Pays 2016: The Benefits of Higher Education for Individuals and Society*. Trends in Higher Education Series. College Board.

³ Merisotis, J. (2020, September 15). A 'closing argument' for the national goal of 60% of adults having more than a high school diploma by 2025. Lumina Foundation. Retrieved September 26, 2022, from <https://www.luminafoundation.org/news-and-views/a-closing-argument-for-the-national-goal-of-60-of-adults-having-more-than-a-high-school-diploma-by-2025/>

⁴ CollegeAPP process. CollegeAPP. (n.d.). Retrieved October 1, 2022, from <https://yourcollegeapp.com/college-app-process>

⁵ Fishbane, A., & Fletcher, E. (2016). *Nudging for Success: Using behavioral science to improve the postsecondary student journey*. Ideas42.

enrollment process. An evaluation of these designs found that they increased satisfaction and clarity of the college enrollment process for military-affiliated adult students. In addition, these solutions helped students complete crucial enrollment steps that were often forgotten or done incorrectly.

While this project aimed specifically to help military-affiliated adults reenroll at one HBCU, we believe a similar approach can be adapted to support prospective adult students at colleges and universities across the U.S.

Identifying Opportunities for Behavioral Design

In the Fall of 2020, 65% of FSU's admitted students did not complete the enrollment process. While the COVID-19 pandemic likely contributed to this drop-off, FSU administrators sought to uncover what else might be hindering enrollment. Because FSU is located in close proximity to the world's largest military installation, Fort Bragg, it is one of the U.S.'s largest HBCUs for military and veteran students. As such, FSU focused on identifying military-specific enrollment challenges and, ultimately, helping more military-affiliated adults successfully enroll on their campus.

Uncovering Barriers to Enrollment for Adults

After a student is accepted to college, there are a series of steps they must take to fully enroll. These might include understanding unfamiliar information, navigating between online portals, and submitting paperwork, among other things. For military-affiliated adults, the enrollment process can include additional steps related to residency and financial aid verifications. And in too many cases, these enrollment steps quickly become drop-off points.

ideas42 sought to understand the enrollment process from the perspective of a military-affiliated adult student and identify challenges. To do this, we first documented every step a military-affiliated adult must complete to enroll at FSU. We collected and analyzed student survey responses and administrative data on the enrollment process, and we spoke with FSU staff across departments to learn what they required of prospective students and what they saw as enrollment pain points. We also interviewed prospective and current military-affiliated adult learners to learn about their own enrollment experiences.

Through this process, we identified three key enrollment challenges for prospective military-affiliated adults. ***These enrollment challenges are not unique to FSU but are common to colleges and universities across the United States.***

**Implausible Pathways**

Prospective military-affiliated students often need flexible course offerings (such as online and evening courses) but find them difficult to learn about and sign up for. As such, they struggle to see how they would fit college into their lives.

**Information Maze**

Prospective military-affiliated adult students may find enrollment requirements confusing, particularly when it comes to understanding the timeline, credit transfer, and military aid process; this can lead them to need additional enrollment support. In addition, some of the information communicated during the enrollment process is not relevant to military adults (e.g. applying for on-campus housing, filling out health forms, etc.), while crucial adult or military-specific information (e.g. deadlines for military aid) is sometimes missing.

**Hassles**

Prospective military-affiliated adult students can be sidetracked by hurdles, inconveniences, and/or administrative hassles, even when they understand what is needed to enroll. Behavioral science research teaches us that even seemingly small hassles (such as needing to find a transcript or filling out a short form) can derail individuals from taking action. As a result, the many enrollment steps—including setting up military aid portals—often overwhelm prospective students.

Design Solutions to Make Enrollment Easier

With these three challenges in mind, ideas42 and FSU set out to clarify and simplify the enrollment process. Our aim was to both help prospective students enroll and to decrease the administrative burden on staff who must answer questions and troubleshoot errors.

We ultimately piloted three design ideas: a personalized enrollment road map, personalized text reminders, and course flexibility messaging.

- 1 The online **road map** served as an interactive, comprehensive, and personalized checklist to guide prospective adult students through FSU's enrollment steps.

MY FSU ENROLLMENT ROAD MAP
 Congratulations, you're already on your way to joining the Bronco family! We have customized your next steps listed below based on information you already provided: **you are a veteran / veteran dependent transfer student.**

Click on any step to learn more:

PHASE 1

- ☐ Respond to offer of admission [\[i\]](#)
- ☐ Request GI Bill Benefits [\[i\]](#)
- ☐ Fill out the FAFSA [\[i\]](#) Due: June 30
- ☐ (If you need housing) Apply for housing [\[i\]](#) Due: June 30

PHASE 2

- ☐ Register for orientation [\[i\]](#)
- ☐ Meet with academic department advisor [\[i\]](#)
- ☐ Set your FSU email password [\[i\]](#)
- ☐ Declare your major [\[i\]](#)
- ☐ Register for classes [\[i\]](#) Due: August 10

PHASE 3

- ☐ Upload your medical records [\[i\]](#)
- ☐ Request VA certification [\[i\]](#)
- ☐ (If you need parking) Apply for a parking permit [\[i\]](#)
- ☐ (If relevant) Apply for disability accommodations [\[i\]](#)

PHASE 4

- ☐ Get your Bronco Student ID card [\[i\]](#)
- ☐ Rent textbooks and materials [\[i\]](#)
- ☐ View your invoice [\[i\]](#) Due: August 19
- ☐ Accept or decline FSU's health insurance [\[i\]](#) Due: September 12

WELCOME TO THE BRONCO FAMILY!

Callout Boxes:

- Links brought students to clear, numbered instructions on how to complete the step along with any links and contact information needed**
- Student information is pulled from their application data; steps below are only shown if relevant to the student profile**
- Due dates for each step are updated for each term**
- Breaking steps into thematic chunks makes lists feel less overwhelming and tends to improve follow-through**

- 2 Timely, targeted text messages encouraged enrollment by clarifying enrollment steps, identifying available help, resolving residency status questions, and reminding students to meet with an advisor.

Message 1:

Jasmine, have you met with an academic advisor yet?

Talking to your department's advisor is important to be able to register for classes on time. Your advisor will help you with transfer credits, scheduling classes, selecting a major, and more.

Message 2:

Great. Do you know what department you will be in, or what your major will be?

No problem!

Contact the general advising line and tell them you are a new student looking to meet with an advisor. They will help direct you to the right person.

onestop@uncfsu.edu
(910) 672-2850

Callout Boxes:

- Clearly stating what advisors can help with reduces ambiguity and captures attention**
- Clarifying questions ensure the message gives the student the most relevant information**
- Reassuring tone reduces threats to student identity**
- Clear next steps reduce ambiguity and spur action**

- 3** Course flexibility messaging **consisted of an email** about flexible course modalities (such as online and evening classes) and normalized requesting additional accommodations from instructors.

Subject line is clear and relevant

Did you know about FSU's flexibility? External

Veronica Alexander, Director of Military Services at FSU <military@uncfsu.edu>
to me

Sender stands out from other emails sent by Admissions



Personalization grabs attention

Dear {FIRST_NAME},

Do you know about the flexibility FSU offers to make college work for you?

We offer flexible class options every term:

- Online classes
- Hybrid classes
- 8-week classes
- Evening classes
- Classes held on Fort Bragg

Ensures students know about the available course modalities

Bullets and bolding direct limited attention

Plus, instructors can create personalized learning plans to balance school with your other responsibilities.

FSU's instructors *expect* students to have other responsibilities. When things come up like military deployments, family emergencies, or mental health needs, they can create personalized plans to keep you on track.

Testimonials create social proof (normalizing and destigmatizing) for using FSU's flexible options

"I have a lot on my plate, but FSU has been so convenient."



Araina-Veteran, military spouse, mom and FSU student

"I do whatever I can do so you experience the class in about the same way as you would if you weren't deployed. Not just getting through the class, but also that you finish it and aren't panicking and stressed when already in a high stress situation."

-FSU Professor of Psychology

Complete Your Enrollment Steps

Registration for classes closes on August 10th

Personalized call to action, with a deadline, facilitates follow-through

Questions? Contact our military specialists:



Veronica Alexander is FSU's Director for Military Services.
valexander@uncfsu.edu

In addition to these three designs, ideas42 shared recommendations related to the application process and platform, as well as more general suggestions (e.g. simplifying language around online degree requirements and streamlining the military scholarship application process). While implementing all of these recommendations was outside the scope for our engagement, they demonstrate additional opportunities to help prospective adult students successfully navigate enrollment.

Results

In the summer of 2022, ideas42 and FSU piloted these solutions to gain insight into how they impacted enrollment outcomes for military-affiliated adult transfer students.

We evaluated administrative data over 10 weeks to compare military and non-military adult transfer students on outcomes such as residency status, class registration, and decision to enroll. In total, 820 prospective transfer students were included in the pilot, and of these, 352 were military-affiliated adults who were exposed to the design package. We also implemented an endline survey in which 220 students provided qualitative feedback about their enrollment experience.

Ultimately, military-affiliated adult transfer students who recalled seeing the road map and text messages reported less difficulty in understanding what steps were required to enroll and how to complete those enrollment steps.

“ I loved that the road map was interactive. The links allowed me to register for classes more efficiently and also connect to my military resources.”

The road map reduced confusion about enrollment steps in general, and text reminders helped students meet with advisors. Importantly, military-affiliated adult transfer students who recalled the road map and the text messages rated the overall enrollment experience more positively.

“ The road map was very helpful and made the enrollment process easy, especially for a veteran. Many of my questions were answered by following the steps.”

The interventions also helped more military-affiliated students resolve their tuition residency status, which allowed them to qualify for in-state tuition (\$500 per semester, compared to \$2,500 per semester for out-of-state). We found that the number of students who were missing their residency determination decreased by 20% and that the interventions increased the number who qualified for in-state tuition by 6%. Helping students access the lower tuition costs is especially important because affordability can often make the difference between those who do and those who do not ultimately enroll.

Military-affiliated adult transfer students who recalled seeing the road map and text messages reported ...



Less difficulty understanding
what steps are required to enroll



Less difficulty understanding
how to complete the enrollment steps



More **positive enrollment experience**

... and felt more positively about FSU in general:



More likely to **believe FSU supports military-affiliated adults**



More likely to **recommend FSU to a peer**

Based on this pilot, qualitative feedback, and quantitative results, FSU now plans to scale the ideas42 designs to other groups of students.

Takeaway

Many adults who intend to enroll in college can be derailed by seemingly-small behavioral challenges. Whenever possible, colleges and universities should look at their enrollment processes from the perspective of prospective adult students and explore what can be done to directly address the challenges these prospective students face. For military-affiliated adults at FSU, that meant removing hassles, clarifying information, and making online and flexible course options more salient. These low-cost behavioral design solutions show strong potential to help more adult students in the U.S. successfully enroll in college. We look forward to exploring how to bring this student-centered, behavioral approach to other schools and contexts to help even more students secure their economic future through postsecondary education.