plus 50
Community Colleges:
AGELESS LEARNING

Educating **Plus 50** Learners: Opportunities for Community Colleges

Community colleges can meet a critical need by serving plus 50 students.

The baby boomer generation profoundly shaped American culture and will continue its trend-setting ways as it enters what have been the traditional retirement years. The Bureau of Labor Statistics projects that the number of workers ages 55-64 will increase by 36.5% between 2006 and 2016, and the number of workers age 65 and older will increase by more than 80%.[1] Those who do not stay in the workforce are looking for ways to remain mentally active and engaged in their communities.

Older Americans have their own interests in continuing to learn, work, and connect – but society as a whole also has an interest in keeping them on the job. Amid a turbulent economy, the skills, work ethic, experience, and leadership the baby boomers bring to the workplace are invaluable. For many of them, staying on the job is not a choice, but a necessity. At the same time, there is a great need for plus 50 adults to provide value through volunteering: the skills of the plus 50 population represent a critical resource for nonprofits, schools, and faith-based groups seeking to improve communities and lives.

Community colleges are uniquely positioned to respond to the growing demands among plus 50 adults, nonprofits, and businesses for job retraining and career development programs. Community colleges have a long tradition of welcoming the non-traditional student and are known for providing creative programming that meets evolving community needs. It is up to community colleges to meet the challenges posed by a burgeoning class of plus 50 students. Many colleges are on the frontlines of those responding to these growing needs and demands. This executive summary spotlights a broad range of programs and services currently offered at community colleges, while it also suggests areas where substantive improvement could be effected.

The Plus 50 Initiative Survey

The Atlantic Philanthropies has recognized both the great societal need for programs that serve older Americans and the important role that community colleges can play in meeting this need. Consequently, The Atlantic Philanthropies provided funding for the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) to conceive and implement the Plus 50 Initiative, a three-year project designed to build and support model programs for plus 50 students at 15 community colleges.

As part of this initiative, AACC commissioned a survey of all 1,177 community colleges in the United States. The sample includes data from 204 unique colleges that are generally representative of community colleges in size, region of the country, urban/rural locales, and percentage of enrollment comprising the 50-64 and 65+ age groups. The survey asked colleges to report on their existing and planned programming for plus 50 students. This executive summary provides a snapshot of the survey results.

---
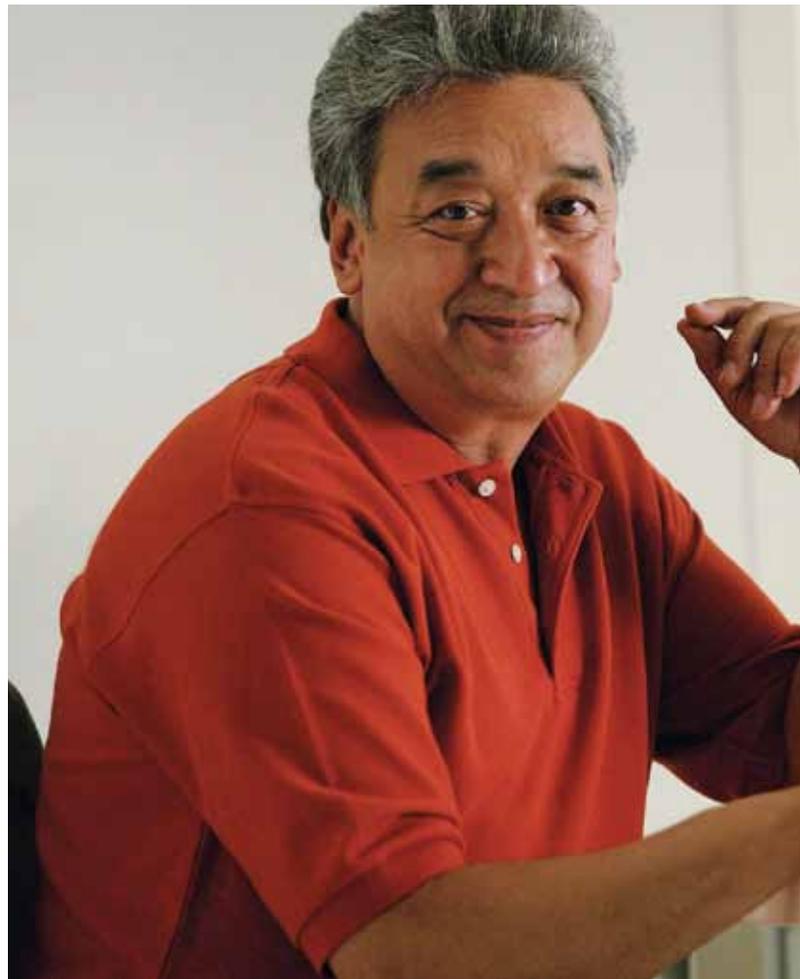
1   www.bls.gov/spotlight/2008/older_workers

Community colleges have a wide range of offerings for plus 50 students in areas of personal enrichment, workforce training and career development, and volunteering.
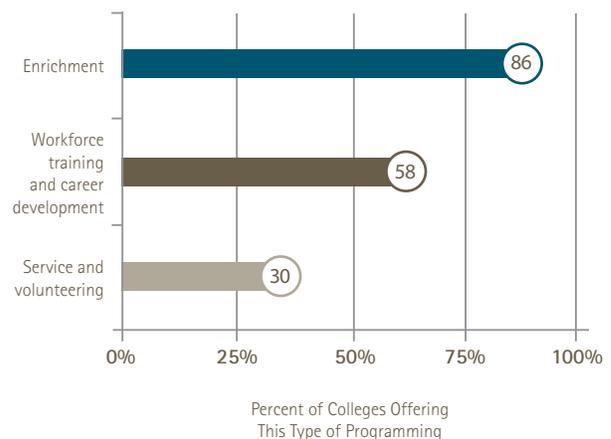
An impressive 84% of colleges reported that they have program offerings targeted to plus 50 students, illustrating the fact that colleges perceive the demand for services from this population and are working to meet it. The offerings of the colleges with plus 50 programming focus in one or more of the following three areas.

Enrichment courses are general studies (such as math and foreign language) or personal interests (such as cooking and yoga) that students enroll in for academic development, to relieve stress from their busy lives, and for personal enrichment.

Workforce Training and Career Development are courses and services that help people upgrade their skills for the purposes of re-entering the workforce or advancing their careers. Colleges offer coursework in resume writing and job interviewing, computer refresher courses, and certificate programs that help students train for new careers, as well as job placement services and community partnerships with employers.

Service and Volunteering are programs and services that support plus 50 learners in finding opportunities to volunteer their skills and talents in their communities. Services can include issuing a directory of volunteer opportunities and matching skilled volunteers with nonprofits.
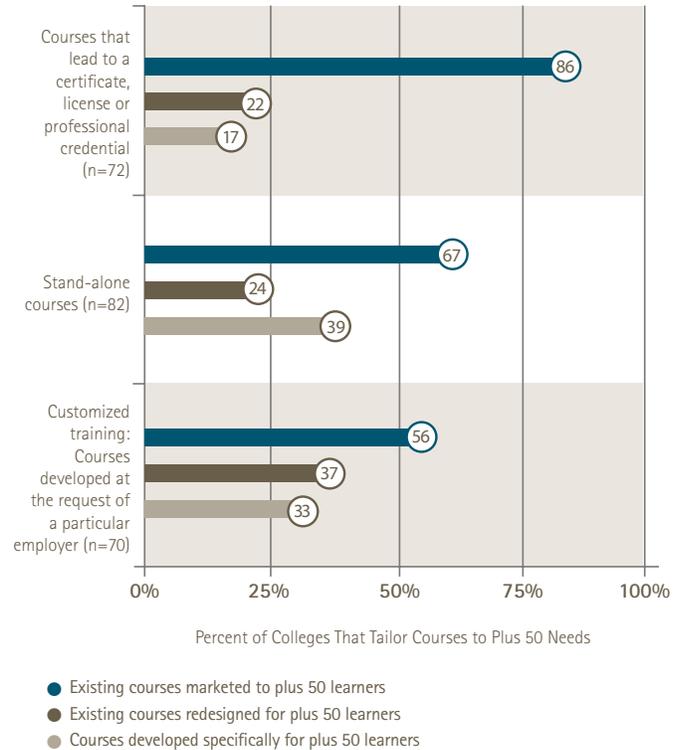
Colleges' Plus 50 Program Focus Areas (n=164)

Focus Area	Percent
Enrichment	86
Workforce training and career development	58
Service and volunteering	30

Percent of Colleges Offering
This Type of Programming

Colleges tend to focus on enrichment, with workforce training and career development offerings less common – even though plus 50 students have a critical need for such offerings.

Enrichment programming represents, by far, the most common type of coursework targeted to plus 50 students. **Not only did 86% of the colleges report offering enrichment programming, but 70% of the colleges with enrichment coursework plan to expand their offerings,** and half of the 14% that do not currently have enrichment offerings for plus 50 students plan to add them. The focus on enrichment may be the result of an outdated stereotype of the "older learner" as a senior citizen who attends college to fill idle days during retirement. With this inaccurate and stereotypical image of plus 50 students, a college is likely to focus on non-credit, personal interest courses that are taken purely as a form of enjoyment.

Of the Colleges Offering Workforce Training Courses: Extent to Which Colleges Explicitly Tailor Courses to Plus 50 Needs

Courses that lead to a certificate, license or professional credential (n=72)
- 86
- 22
- 17

Stand-alone courses (n=82)
- 67
- 24
- 39

Customized training: Courses developed at the request of a particular employer (n=70)
- 56
- 37
- 33

0%   25%   50%   75%   100%

Percent of Colleges That Tailor Courses to Plus 50 Needs

● Existing courses marketed to plus 50 learners
● Existing courses redesigned for plus 50 learners
● Courses developed specifically for plus 50 learners

Respondents were allowed to check more than one "offering method" (developing, redesigning, or marketing), so percentages total to more than 100%.
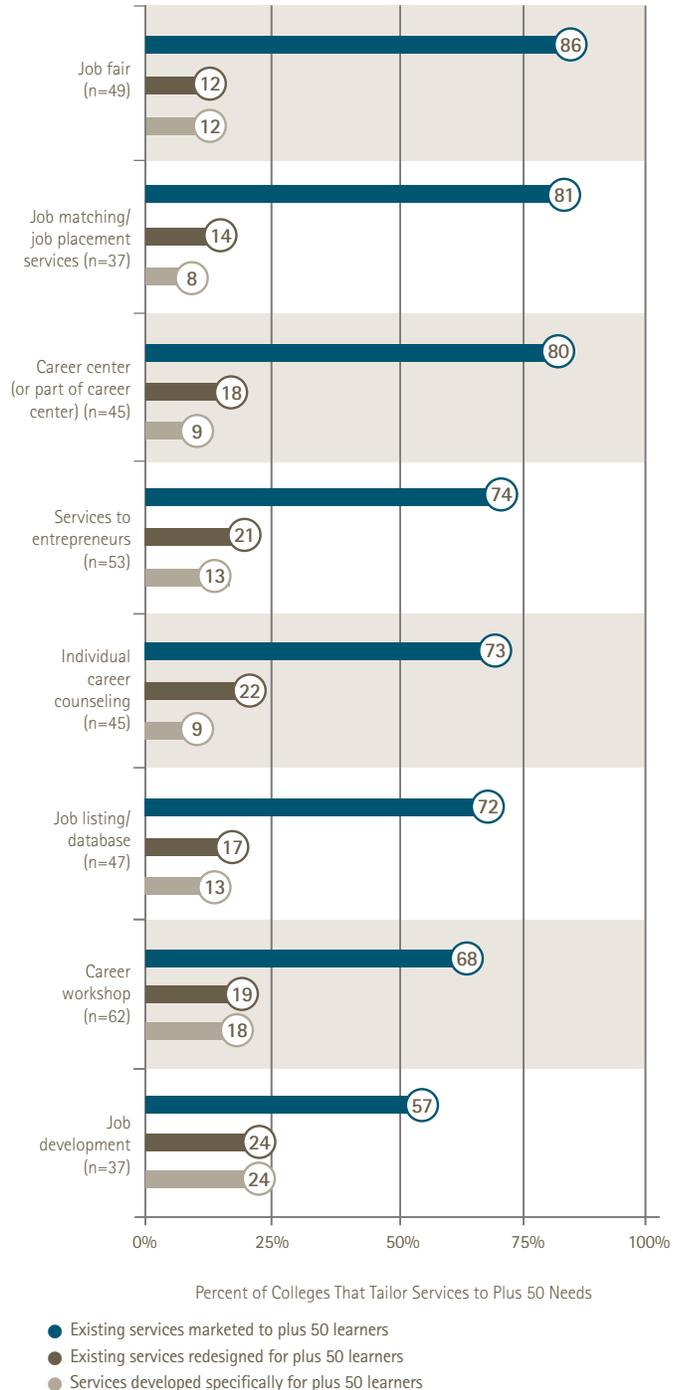
But today's plus 50 learner is very different from the stereotype. People in this age group are very likely to still be working or looking to re-enter the workforce. Even the 65+ demographic does not fit the stereotype, as many who reach age 65 are postponing retirement. With the labor force projected to increase by more than 80% for both of these age groups by 2016, and with the current economic crisis decimating retirement savings, the need for programming that supports plus 50 students in reaching career goals is ever more acute. Yet the reality is that only 58% of community colleges offer workforce training and career development courses and services directly tailored to plus 50 students.

By concentrating their efforts on enrichment courses, colleges are also bypassing a potential revenue source. The market will bear higher prices for training/retraining courses than it will for enrichment courses. Students are willing to pay more for courses that will help them command a higher wage or return to the workforce than they are for courses taken for personal interest or enjoyment. Since colleges can charge market prices for non-credit courses, colleges that offer more non-credit training/retraining courses can increase their revenue from course fees.

In addition, colleges often do not tailor workforce training and career development offerings specifically to plus 50 needs and convenience. Instead, they simply market existing courses and services to them.

Only 36% of colleges reported that they have modified curricula or delivery to meet the needs of plus 50 students. This tendency is reflected in survey results about workforce training courses: it is more common for colleges to market existing courses than to redesign them or develop new ones.

Of the Colleges Offering Career Development Services: Extent to Which Colleges Explicitly Tailor Services to Plus 50 Needs

Job fair (n=49): 86, 12, 12
Job matching/ job placement services (n=37): 81, 14, 8
Career center (or part of career center) (n=45): 80, 18, 9
Services to entrepreneurs (n=53): 74, 21, 13
Individual career counseling (n=45): 73, 22, 9
Job listing/ database (n=47): 72, 17, 13
Career workshop (n=62): 68, 19, 18
Job development (n=37): 57, 24, 24

Percent of Colleges That Tailor Services to Plus 50 Needs

● Existing services marketed to plus 50 learners
● Existing services redesigned for plus 50 learners
● Services developed specifically for plus 50 learners

Respondents were allowed to check more than one "offering method" (developing, redesigning, or marketing), so percentages total to more than 100%.
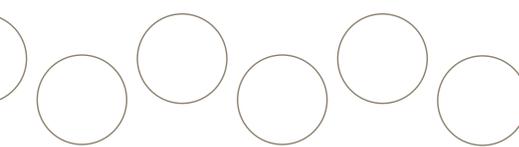
For community colleges that do have workforce training and career development offerings, to what extent are they really meeting the needs of plus 50 students? To meet the career and training needs of this age group, colleges should tailor their offerings. In practice, this means either redesigning courses and services or developing entirely new ones. More often, however, colleges simply market to plus 50 students the offerings that they already have developed for their "standard student."

Research into what older Americans want and need from college courses repeatedly shows that this group has targeted objectives, usually with a utilitarian interest in gaining specific work-related skills as quickly and efficiently as possible. Therefore they are looking for a different type of course delivery. Plus 50 students value concentrated and accelerated program formats, often preferring these to courses that last for a quarter or semester. This group also usually does not want to engage in a full training program to obtain a credential or certificate. Instead, plus 50 students need more flexible options (including modularized courses) to learn a particular skill in order to advance their careers. Because those who are age 50 and older are seeking to efficiently acquire education for new or current careers, colleges need to deliver this education in "chunks," rather than in linear certificate and degree programs.

Colleges are customizing their career development services to the needs of plus 50 students even less frequently than they customize courses for this population. What plus 50 students need from services such as career workshops, job placement services, and career counseling, is very different from what students in their 20s and 30s need. College faculty and staff providing these services need a deep understanding of the particular constraints and opportunities for plus 50 individuals hoping to advance a career: dealing with ageism in the workplace; how to upgrade skills; and how to market their depth of experience to employers. Community colleges need to be responsive to the needs and challenges encountered by the plus 50 student, and design services that are flexible, convenient, and do not require adherence to the traditional academic calendar.

Colleges need to provide more and better support services that help integrate plus 50 students into the campus fabric.

While welcoming to the non-traditional student, community colleges are usually structured around the needs of students seeking an associate degree with intentions of transferring credits to a four-year college. Thus when plus 50 students return to college or arrive on campus for the first time, many of them are outside of their comfort zone. They do not know how to easily navigate an unfamiliar system, and some may feel self-conscious about their presence amid a sea of younger students who appear to be more technically savvy and informed. If colleges cannot increase the comfort level and accessibility for plus 50 students, they will have a hard time attracting and retaining students in this age group.

Supports to Reduce Barriers to Participation: Integrating Plus 50 Students Into the College (n=168)

Percent of Colleges Offering
This Type of Support
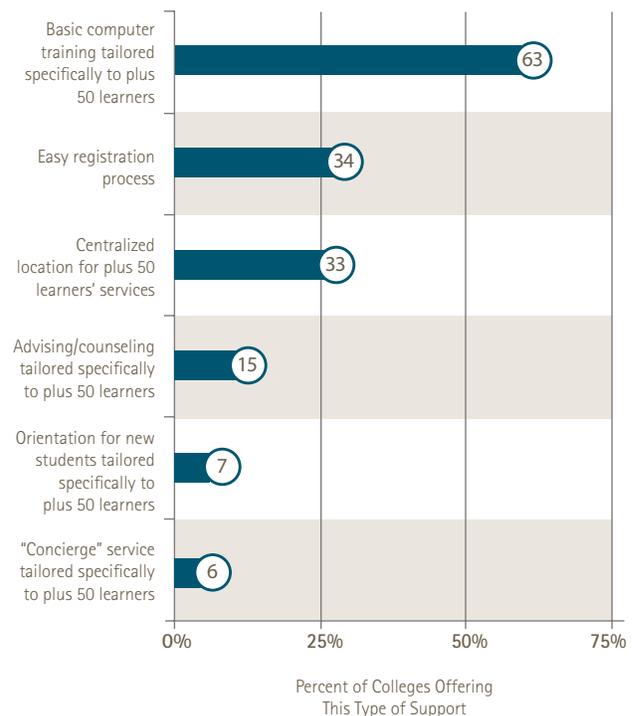
For example, when there are demanding and cumbersome pre-registration requirements such as providing high school transcripts, potential plus 50 students might simply change their minds and not register for courses. Colleges are aware of these challenges, with **63% of colleges reporting that pre-enrollment requirements could discourage plus 50 students from coming to their campuses.**

Colleges are beginning to provide support services to integrate plus 50 students more effectively into classes and activities—but many still have a long way to go. The most commonly offered integration support is basic computer training tailored to plus 50 learners (63% of colleges). These classes are especially important because a key factor in feeling a sense of belonging in the current college classroom is being facile with computers. Some experts see knowledge of computers as "the biggest educational barrier to postsecondary education" for older adults. These computer classes help plus 50 students make the transition back to the classroom and provide a foundation and confidence level to allow them to move on to other coursework requiring these skills.

However, other integration support services are offered far less frequently. **Only 34% of colleges have created easy registration processes for this population** to address the issue of pre-enrollment requirements that create a deterrent to registration. It is also very helpful to have one location where plus 50 students can go to find services, resources, and referrals to help them navigate the system. If plus 50 students are not aware of the resources and services they can access, they are much more likely to leave the college before completing their goals. **Only 33% of colleges have centralized locations for plus 50 students.**

Additional integration support services are even more rare: **just 15% offer tailored advising; 7% offer a new student orientation customized for plus 50 students; and 6% offer "concierge" services.** Advising and counseling for this population could be especially helpful, since advisors could act as "system navigators" for these students. Community colleges most often make advising available to plus 50 students using the same model offered to other students. However, standard student advising is typically not useful for plus 50 learners, as the advisors are more accustomed to addressing the needs of younger adults. The educational goals and needs of plus 50 learners are quite different, and advisors who don't understand those needs will fall short in providing effective guidance.

Both a new student orientation tailored to plus 50 learners and a concierge service would also be helpful as supports that help this student group become integrated into campus life. Getting oriented to campus with others in the plus 50 age group provides a way for incoming students to connect with others who have similar interests and experiences. A plus 50 concierge provides a peer who is available to share information, resources, and referrals with plus 50 students.
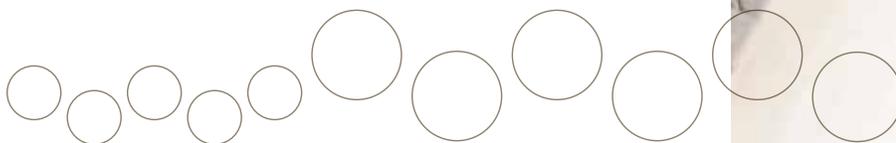
External challenges constrain community colleges in their efforts to provide programming to plus 50 students...

As they implement plus 50 programming, community colleges face critical challenges in accessing needed resources. Such challenges include state policies that govern financial support for plus 50 students, state policies for funding community colleges, and the difficulty of obtaining private funding for plus 50 programs.

Most states offer a tuition waiver for some older learners. For plus 50 students on a tight budget, these tuition waivers can lower the financial barrier to attending community college and potentially help attract older learners to campus. However, the waivers frequently don't attract plus 50 students in practice because they are often available only under limited conditions. For example, to qualify students must often be older than 50 – generally age 60, 62, or 65. Waivers may also be available only for credit courses or full-time students or are usable only for classes that have not been fully enrolled. It is not surprising, then, that **65% of the institutions surveyed reported that their tuition waiver availability under limited conditions is a challenge.** To the extent that plus 50 students need financial assistance to enroll in courses, the constraints imposed by tuition waivers will compromise the ability of colleges to attract and retain these students.

Another challenge that limits access to resources is the state full-time equivalent (FTE) computation and its implications for the college's ability to spend state funding on offerings for the plus 50 learner. More than half of the colleges reported that this poses a challenge to implementing plus 50 programs. State funding for community colleges is complex, and policies vary a great deal from state to state. At a very basic level, though, the issue is that the public funding provided for community colleges is based on the number of FTE students.

In general, the more FTE a college has, the more state funding it receives. However, it is common that only credit hours count toward FTE calculations, and credit courses tend to be less attractive to plus 50 learners. At the same time, older learners often get partial or full tuition waivers – sometimes even for non-credit courses. Therefore, attracting more plus 50 learners to a college could actually cause a net revenue drain for the college. The FTE computation could thus present a significant barrier if it means that a college would sacrifice revenue by expanding offerings to plus 50 learners.

Another constraint on a college's capacity to offer plus 50 programming is the difficulty colleges have in obtaining private funding. Access to private funding makes an important difference in implementation: **50% of colleges with access to private funding have specific budget allocations for plus 50 programming, while only 25% of colleges without access to private funding have these budget allocations.**
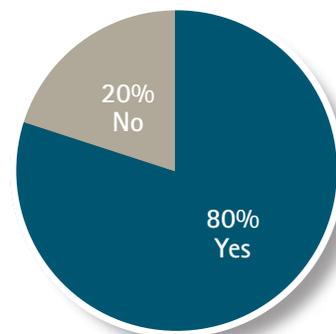
Tuition waivers for plus 50 students are available only under limited conditions.

35% No / 65% Yes
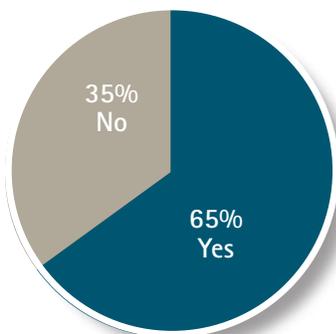
The state FTE computation means less state funding available for resources for plus 50 students.

46% No / 54% Yes
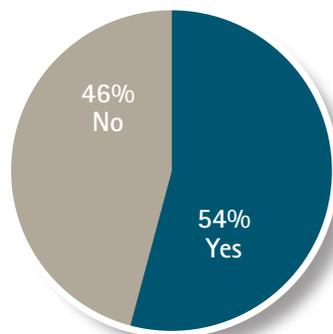
Colleges have difficulty obtaining private funding for plus 50 programs.
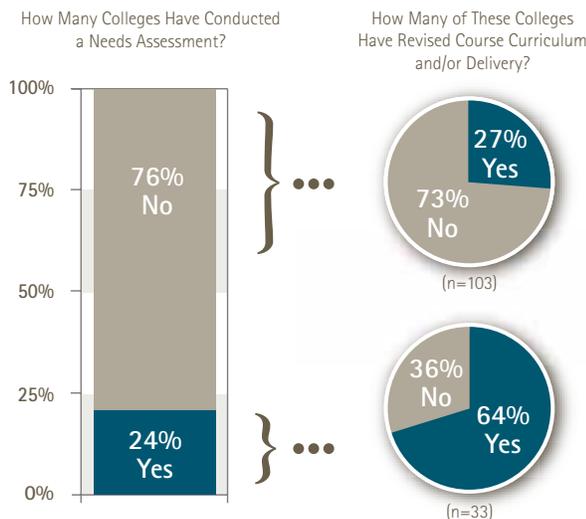
20% No / 80% Yes

...but the major challenge comes from within: the lack of attention to needs assessment.

Resource challenges are far from trivial, but the survey data suggest that a more important factor in providing effective programming is something that colleges themselves control: needs assessment. The educational offerings and support services that a plus 50 learner requires are very different from those suitable to younger adult learners. Without understanding these unique needs among the plus 50 population they serve, colleges will be unable to design effective programs that meet the needs and promote the success of the plus 50 student.

Unfortunately, colleges have not paid sufficient attention to the needs of this customer group – only a shockingly low **24% of colleges have conducted a needs assessment of the local plus 50 population in the last five years.** Colleges that have conducted needs assessments tailor courses and services at a consistently higher rate than do colleges that have not. Those that have done a needs assessment report that they have revised course curricula and/or delivery at twice the rate as the colleges that have not. They also demonstrate a much higher rate of providing supports that help integrate plus 50 students into college life and make the campus and its classes more accessible.

Clearly, knowing one's customer is critical to providing effective programming. In fact, the impact of a needs assessment on whether a college offers plus 50 support services and tailored programming is greater than the ability to find private funding. Gauging the needs of plus 50 students in the community is a step that many colleges seeking to provide plus 50 programs can accomplish with only a modest expenditure. Yet, the survey results demonstrate that a needs assessment can make a critical difference in the quality of services provided for plus 50 students.

Colleges That Have Conducted a Needs Assessment Are More Likely to Offer Supports to the Plus 50 Learner Than Colleges That Have Not

Colleges That Have Conducted a Needs Assessment Are More Likely to Revise Course Curriculum and/or Delivery Than Colleges That Have Not
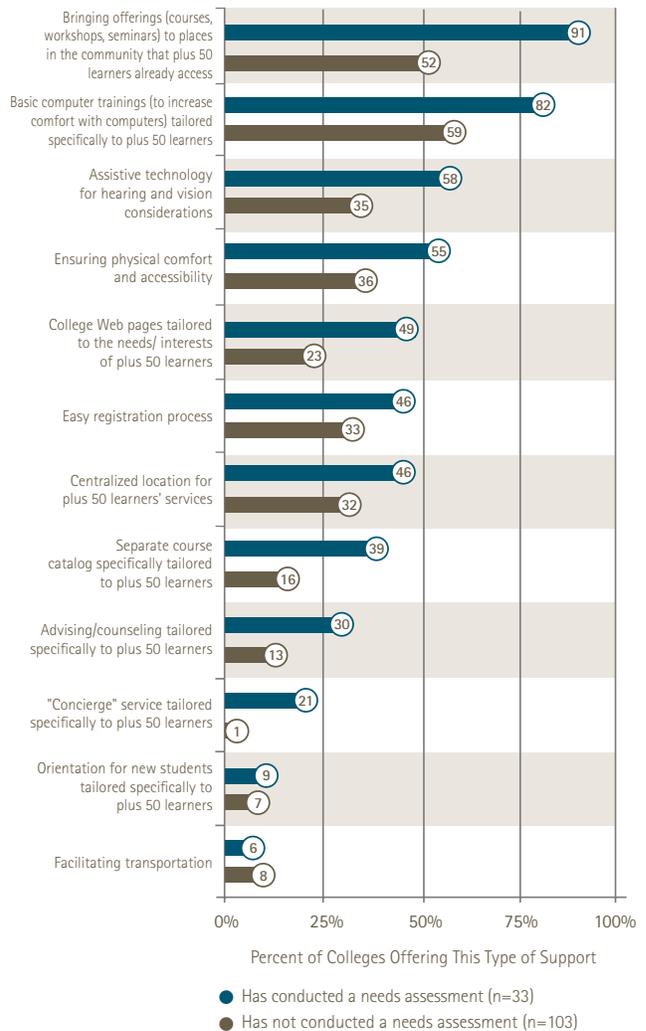
Calls to action for community colleges that are developing and growing their plus 50 programs.

Know your customer: conduct a high-quality needs assessment. Plus 50 students are very different consumers of education from younger adult students, and yet few colleges are doing the work that is needed to really understand the needs and values of this demographic. It is not enough to simply market existing offerings to the plus 50 student: offerings should be tailored and targeted. Without understanding the needs of this group, colleges will not be able to tailor offerings effectively.

In creating offerings for the plus 50 learner, move beyond the "low-hanging fruit" of enrichment courses. Many community colleges have traditionally thought of their older students as "seniors," a group assumed to be mostly interested in attending enrichment courses. Since colleges typically have an inventory of non-credit personal interest courses, developing programs for plus 50 students based on enrichment is the path of least resistance. However, many students 50 and older – and even 65 and older – are looking for workforce training courses and career development services. Students in these age groups are also looking to connect and give back and seek volunteer opportunities that can make good use of their skills. By expanding into programs that focus on career development or volunteering, community colleges can meet the needs of the plus 50 student far beyond the narrowly defined needs of personal enrichment.

Recognize the ever more urgent need for workforce training and career development programming. Students age 50 and older have long turned to community colleges to learn new skills and brush up on old ones. In an economic downturn, plus 50 students that are laid off or worried about layoffs will come to community colleges for help with career goals in ever greater numbers. Currently, only 58% of the colleges with plus 50 programming have career development offerings for this age group, and this represents a large gap in this market. More colleges should capitalize on the need of plus 50 students for courses and services that will help them meet their career goals.

For workforce training and career development programming, customize the offerings to match the needs and learning objectives of the plus 50 student. While the colleges with career development offerings for plus 50 students are moving in the right direction, many can do more. Colleges most commonly market these offerings to plus 50 students without actually tailoring them to the needs of this population. Offerings that are developed for the younger student will be less effective for plus 50 students. Again, colleges should know their customer. They should develop programming that can address the particular challenges and opportunities that plus 50 workers face as they get back in the labor force or advance their careers.

Concentrate more on support services that can help plus 50 students integrate into campus life. Plus 50 students may feel out of their element on a college campus, and this can be a real deterrent to attending community college. Yet colleges hoping to attract plus 50 students can do more to support "integration" services. Colleges need to greatly expand their support services – such as a plus 50 concierge, customized advising, and customized new student orientations – if they want plus 50 learners to feel welcome, comfortable, and integrated into campus life.

Provide additional tailored financial aid that goes beyond the state-mandated tuition waivers. While most states provide tuition waivers to older learners, colleges reported that they often are available only under limited conditions and that this is a challenge. Tuition waivers, then, are not a particularly effective way to attract plus 50 students for whom lack of finances is a barrier. Providing financial aid packages specifically for plus 50 students will lower a financial barrier to attending community college – and in doing so, aid in building the program.

Put policies in place that streamline the registration process for plus 50 students, starting with jettisoning the pre-enrollment requirements that apply to the "standard student." Plus 50 students are generally looking for individual courses and only rarely plan to acquire an associate degree and/or transfer to a four-year institution. Thus it does not make sense to apply pre-enrollment requirements to this population, which would only be put off by these rules. Colleges that allow plus 50 learners to waive stringent pre-registration requirements will attract more of these students.
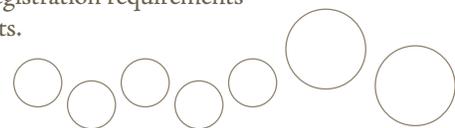
Remember that even though some plus 50 students need financial aid, this age group also represents a valuable market and a source of revenue for colleges – and the way to tap into this market is to provide a service that the consumer values. There are various reasons that plus 50 students may not appear to be an attractive market to college executives. FTE computations may be structured in such a way that attracting more plus 50 students may actually lead to a revenue drain for the college. State policy may mandate fee waivers for older students, which compounds the problem of revenue drain. In addition, 49% of the colleges reported believing that plus 50 students would find fees for non-credit courses too expensive, and older students may need financial aid. Despite these constraints, plus 50 students have the potential to be a very profitable market, given the financial success of the baby boom generation. If colleges make an effort to know their customer and tailor their offerings, they can tap into a profitable market segment.

References

American Council on Education. 2007. *Framing New Terrain: Older Adults & Higher Education.*

American Council on Education. 2008. *Mapping New Directions: Higher Education for Older Adults.*

Bureau of Labor Statistics. July 2008. *Spotlight on Statistics: Older Workers.*
www.bls.gov/spotlight/2008/older_workers

Chao, E.L., DeRocco, E.S., Flynn, M.K. 2007. *Adult Learners in Higher Education: Barriers to Success and Strategies to Improve Results. Employment and Training Administration Occasional Paper,* 2007-03.

Harvard School of Public Health and MetLife Foundation Initiative on Retirement and Civic Engagement. 2004. *Reinventing Aging.*

MetLife Mature Market Institute. 2006. *Living Longer, Working Longer: The Changing Landscape of the Aging Workforce – A MetLife Study.* Westport, CT: Metropolitan Life Insurance Company.

Portland Community College Taskforce on Aging. 2007. *Boomers Go to College.*

Wiener, L. 2007. *The Role of Community Colleges in an Aging Society.* AARP Office of Academic Affairs Occasional Papers, Volume 3.

AACC

AMERICAN ASSOCIATION
of COMMUNITY COLLEGES