

A Dissertation  
entitled  
An Examination of Promotional Marketing Strategies and Value Factors that Influenced  
Adult Learners' Enrollment in Community Colleges  
by  
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Submitted to the Graduate Faculty as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
Doctor of Philosophy in Higher Education

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December 2023

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An Abstract of

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This quantitative study explored the intricate landscape of marketing strategies influencing adult learners' satisfaction with their decisions to enroll in community colleges. Using survey research design, this study illuminated significant insights into the multifaceted world of higher education marketing, particularly in the context of community colleges. By employing a robust methodology and comprehensive analysis, this study provided valuable implications for both theoretical advancements and practical applications within the field of higher education marketing. The study utilized the 7P marketing mix theoretical framework and a wide array of demographic and promotional

marketing variables to understand the complex landscape of adult learner enrollment. The research questions delved into various aspects, including the role of promotional marketing strategies, value factors, ways of gathering information, and their correlation with adult learners' satisfaction with their enrollment decisions. The study made several significant findings. Firstly, the study highlighted the pivotal role of electronic communication methods such as email and text messages, alongside word-of-mouth recommendations, in influencing adult learners. These findings underline the importance of targeted, digital marketing strategies for community colleges. Additionally, the research shed light on the significance of interpersonal experiences, emphasizing the value of one-on-one meetings and in-person events in adult learners' decision-making processes. The study also unveiled gender-based disparities in satisfaction levels, with female adult learners exhibiting notably higher satisfaction rates than their male counterparts. This gender-specific variation emphasized the need for tailored, gender-focused marketing approaches to enhance satisfaction levels effectively. The research identified a combination of six key predictors that significantly influenced adult learners' enrollment decisions in community colleges. These predictors included being female, utilizing email, engaging with outdoor advertisements, valuing faculty expertise, flexible course offerings, and the availability of financial aid and scholarships.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank my husband and best friend, Greg, for all the support and encouragement along this journey. Greg, I would not have accomplished this without your love and willingness to always listen even if you didn't always understand the content. You had faith in my abilities even when I had many doubtful crying sessions along the way. I would like to thank my mother for being there for me and having the faith in me to accomplish my goal even when those I encountered in my life said I wouldn't. I would like to thank my dear friends Chrissy Weber-Bresky, Chrissy Matthews, and John Griffin; the three of you were my cheerleaders along this journey and I cannot thank you enough for your love, friendship, support, and celebrations of small wins throughout this challenging process. Lastly, I would like to thank Dr. Durst for all her guidance and willingness to encourage me toward completion. Dr. Durst, you took me under your wing when you had a full plate and shared your invaluable expertise and support. You challenged me throughout this journey, and I will be forever grateful.

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## **Chapter One**

### **Introduction**

Chapter 1 provides an overview of the dissertation, including background and scope, statement of the problem, purpose of the study, research questions, and significance of the study. This chapter also includes definitions used throughout the study, along with delimitations, limitations, and assumptions.

### **Background and Scope**

Growing competition among colleges and universities to recruit students has emphasized the need to incorporate marketing strategies into campuswide enrollment plans (Filip, 2012; Kotler & Fox, 1995). Institutions have increasingly devoted more financial resources into marketing tactics that emphasize brand identity, competitive advantage, and positioning strategies (Dollinger et al., 2018; Edmiston-Strasser, 2009; Fiaz et al., 2019; Harrison-Walker, 2009; Judson et al., 2008; Kotler & Fox, 1995; Sung & Yang, 2008). To attract prospective students from diverse markets, administrators at higher education institutions have searched for unique expressions of brand identity and competitive advantages that make them stand out to various audiences (American Marketing Association [AMA], 2022; Judson et al., 2008). Marketing staff at higher education institutions have also established institutional brands (e.g., logos, symbols, distinct images) that help tell the institution's story or provide a recognizable brand standard in the eyes of prospective markets (AMA, 2022; Judson et al., 2008).

Given this emergent competition and widespread branding effort, researchers have increasingly examined university marketing, the ways in which recruitment administrators use institutional marketing and communication strategies, and the impact of marketing strategies on strengthening college and university branding efforts (Edmiston-Strasser, 2009). Scholars have

also explored brand identity, image criteria, and positioning strategies in efforts to determine how institutions may be valued or perceived by students, impacts of institutional choice, and increased engagement of students using successful marketing strategies (del Rocío Bonilla et al., 2020; Dollinger et al., 2018; Fiaz et al., 2019; Ho & Hung, 2008; Mentz & Whiteside, 2003; Sung & Yang, 2008). Marketing can serve as a persuasive tool in reinforcing the external influences of parents, friends, school counselors, and others on students' decisions to enroll (Tucciarone, 2008).

Scholars have demonstrated that successful marketing strategies identify customers and aim to understand their needs, preferences, and factors influencing their decisions to engage with products or services; that knowledge of internal and external environments provides opportunities for marketing staff at higher education institutions to include market segmentation along specific criteria such as gender, age, race/ethnicity, geography, or income levels to target market selections (Chartered Institute of Marketing [CIM], 2015; Ho & Hung, 2008; Kotler & Fox, 1995; Quatroche, 2004). Market segmentation, along with successful promotional strategies that include preferred messaging (e.g., affordability, convenience, accessible location) can position higher education institutions with a competitive advantage (CIM, 2015; Ho & Hung, 2008; Kotler & Fox, 1995; Quatroche, 2004). When target markets are segmented and numerous marketing methods (e.g., electronic, digital, print, and one-on-one tactics) are aimed at certain populations—such as university students enrolling in bachelor's degree programs, community college students, or nontraditional students (i.e., those 25 years and older)—higher education administrators can better understand varying motivations and actions taken by prospective students during the enrollment process (e.g., inquiries, completing applications for admission)

and their subsequent decisions to enroll (Culliver, 2015; Hernandez, 2017; Landrum, 2018; Martin, 2016; Quatroche, 2004; Tucciarone, 2008).

The use of marketing strategy has not been limited to public and private 4-year institutions. A range of issues such as diverse demographics, various student barriers, advances in technology, workforce demands, increased competition among colleges and universities, military service, and hands-on job training programs have also pushed community colleges toward efforts to maintain a competitive advantage and adapt to meet the needs of numerous target markets (Clagett, 2012; Kotler & Goldgehn, 1981). Scholars have subsequently explored the use of successful marketing strategies at community colleges (Clagett, 2012; Finkel, 2018; Tucciarone, 2008). The use of external data (e.g., environmental scans, labor market research and surveys), along with institutional research data, can provide marketing departments at community colleges insight into the ways in which to select and reach prospective student target markets and efficiently allocate marketing resources (Clagett, 2012; Finkel, 2018; Martin, 2016).

For marketing purposes, researchers have attempted to understand what motivates prospective students to enroll in higher education institutions through studying satisfaction levels and value factors for diverse student segments (Kotler & Fox, 1995). Advances in technology have increasingly pushed marketing strategists toward the development of innovative ways to create value for individual customers, including college and university students (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2000, 2003). Emerging technologies have warranted a growing demand in marketing approaches for a more collaborative, interactive, and participatory experience of consumers in what they choose to engage; student choices and involvement in product and marketing efforts have been termed the cocreation of value (Chalcraft & Hughes, 2015; Dollinger et al., 2018; Elsharnouby, 2015; Fagerstrøm & Ghinea, 2013; Fiaz et al., 2019;

Guilbault, 2016; Mahajan & Golahit, 2019; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2000, 2003; Smørvik & Vespestad, 2020). In the context of higher education, ideas around the cocreation of value emerged in the beginning of the 21st century (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2000). Student populations consciously choose to engage in specific marketing strategies or institutional programs, services, and amenities; therefore, researchers have interpreted these engagements as expressions of student satisfaction and what they consider of value (Elsharnouby, 2015; Mahajan & Golahit, 2019; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2000).

To determine student satisfaction and what students value across higher education institutions, scholars have developed marketing models and concepts that measure the influences of specific marketing tactics on various market segments (Culliver, 2015; Hernandez, 2017; Knowles et al., 2020; Landrum, 2018). As an example, collegiate institutional attributes such as academic programs, rankings, location, and accessibility have been used as overall message signals and included in marketing models (Culliver, 2015; Hernandez, 2017; Knowles et al., 2020; Landrum, 2018). One of the most widely used models to predict consumer behavior, company growth, and revenue projections is the 7P marketing mix (Indeed, 2022; Landrum, 2018). The major components of the 7P marketing mix are comprised of the world-renowned 4Ps of marketing (i.e., product, price, place, and promotion) and the additional factors of process, people, and physical evidence (Filip, 2012; Havel et al., 1996; Landrum, 2018; Mahajan & Golahit, 2019). Higher education researchers have used factors of the 7P marketing mix to examine relationships related to student performance, satisfaction, referral acts, and attitudes and opinions toward marketing initiatives. They have also used the marketing mix to evaluate higher education system efficiency and effectiveness in influencing the decisions of prospective

students to enroll in colleges and universities (Filip, 2012; Ivy, 2008; Landrum, 2018; Mahajan & Golahit, 2019).

The 7P marketing mix evaluates components (i.e., product, price, place, promotion, process, people, and physical evidence) among target market segments (e.g., traditional, or nontraditional students; Filip, 2012; Ivy, 2008; Kotler & Fox, 1995; Landrum, 2018; Mahajan & Golahit, 2019). Early research between the 1960s and 1980s focused heavily on the traditional-aged White college students between 18–24 years of age who attended a residential campus full time and shared common student learning experiences, development, and interactions in and outside the classroom with peers and faculty (Terenzini & Pascarella, 1998). Traditional college students, usually between the ages of 18–24, typically follow a straight path through their college degrees, mostly characterized as enrolling in a college or university immediately upon completion of high school and attending as a full-time student through graduation (Horn & Carroll, 1996; Juskiewicz, 2020; Ohio Department of Higher Education [ODHE], 2020; Terenzini & Pascarella, 1998). The diversifying prospective student population has increasingly warranted further research, especially focusing on those who may attend college part time, are commuter students, are community college students, are employed while attending college, or have family or personal obligations while pursuing degree completion (Fairchild, 2003; Juskiewicz, 2020; Kim, 2002; Terenzini & Pascarella, 1998).

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), which examines enrollment trends for traditional and nontraditional students enrolled in postsecondary institutions each year, nontraditional college students—also known as adult learners—possess a range of characteristics that combine any of the following factors: 25 years or older, part-time enrollment, full-time employment, financial independence from parents, possible dependents,

single parent status, GED or high school diploma, and more than 1 year between high school and college attendance (Horn & Carroll, 1996; Juskiewicz, 2020; Kim, 2002; Melchiorre & Johnson, 2017; NCES, 2021; Sheffer et al., 2020; Terenzini & Pascarella, 1998). To broaden the scope of this study, I used nontraditional students and adult learners interchangeably, since many students aged 25 years and older also possess a range of characteristics as defined by NCES.

The potential untapped market of prospective students that exists among those adult learners 25 years and older has become more prevalent for institutions of higher education in recent years. Scholars have also started to delve deeper into this population to examine enrollment decisions, risk factors, student barriers, motivation and learning experiences, student identity, needs and expectations, and impacts on institutional policy issues (Culliver, 2015; Fairchild, 2003; Frey, 2007; Horn & Carroll, 1996; Johnson, 2008; Justice & Dornan, 2001; Juskiewicz, 2020; Kasworm, 2016; Kim, 2002; Knowles et al., 2020; Landrum, 2018; Leggins, 2021; Merriam, 2018; Ritt, 2008; Schuetze & Slowey, 2002; Sheffer et al., 2020; Zamanou, 1993). Research has uncovered that adult learners are a unique population and differ from that of traditional-age populations; as such, adult learners present an opportunity for higher education institutions to tailor marketing strategies, messaging, support services, teaching and learning, and flexible programming to meet the valued needs of this population (Culliver, 2015; Justice & Dornan, 2001; Kim, 2002; Knowles et al., 2020; Landrum, 2018; Merriam, 2018). Adult learners may have different motivations to enroll compared to traditional-aged college students and can respond differently to specific marketing factors impacting their motivations or decisions to enroll (Culliver, 2015; Justice & Dornan, 2001; Kim, 2002; Knowles et al., 2020; Landrum, 2018; Merriam, 2018).

The shift to attract more adult learners to earn a postsecondary credential has intensified the efforts of higher education leaders—particularly community college personnel, policymakers, and external stakeholders—to effectively market to this population (Hanover Research, 2022b; Juskiewicz, 2020; Lumina Foundation, 2023; ODHE, 2022c; Person et al., 2020; Ruffalo Noel Levitz [RNL], 2019, 2021; Weissman, 2021). Community colleges provide affordable, close-to-home pathways for workforce training and 4-year degrees to diverse student populations. Historically, enrollment for community colleges has mirrored the state of the U.S. economy and grown when the economy has weakened (American Association of Community Colleges [AACC], 2022b; Juskiewicz, 2020; Knox, 2022; Weissman, 2021). Unfortunately, community colleges have experienced steady declines in enrollment since 2011 due to decreases in the overall population of traditional-age students and a reduction in the number of enrolled adult learners (AACC, 2022b; Gallup, 2022; Weissman, 2021). Between 2011 and 2017, adult learners 30–49 years old experienced the largest decrease over a 7-year period, dropping an astounding 34% (AACC, 2019). Amid continued declines that were particularly exacerbated by the COVID-19 global pandemic health crisis, community colleges lost an additional 700,000 students (15% decline) by 2020, and another 351,000 students (7.8%) by Spring 2022, leaving many college officials looking for ways to effectively market to prospective target populations such as adult learners (Hanover Research, 2022b; Juskiewicz, 2020; Knox, 2022; Lumina Foundation, 2023; ODHE, 2022c; Person et al., 2020; RNL, 2019, 2021; Weissman, 2021).

National and state scholars, policymakers, and stakeholders have advocated increasingly for better strategies geared toward increasing postsecondary educational attainment levels of adult learners (Lumina Foundation, 2023; ODHE, 2020, 2022a, 2022c; Person et al., 2020). Public and private efforts surrounding initiatives to increase the proportion of U.S. adults who



earn a postsecondary credential by 2025 have tracked (a) state and institutional policies, (b) marketing and recruitment efforts, (c) support services for adult learners, (d) financial assistance, (e) equity considerations, and (f) crisis response (Lumina Foundation, 2023; ODHE, 2020, 2022c; Person et al., 2020; RNL, 2019, 2021). In 2022, more than 1,000 community colleges nationwide primarily served adult learners, as the average enrolled college student was 27 years old (AACC, 2022a). Community colleges can serve an integral role in contributing to increased postsecondary attainment levels of adult learners nationwide, but the knowledge of effective marketing strategies geared toward segmentation of this target market population and what they find most valuable has been limited in scholarship and sparse for this institution type.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Marketing scholars have examined a range of factors influencing students' decisions to enroll in higher education institutions, but research surrounding their decision to enroll in community colleges has remained sparse (CIM, 2015; Culliver, 2015; del Rocío Bonilla et al., 2020; Dollinger et al., 2018; Fiaz et al., 2019; Hernandez, 2017; Ho & Hung, 2008; Kotler & Fox, 1995; Landrum, 2018; Martin, 2016; Mentz & Whiteside, 2003; Quatroche, 2004; Sung & Yang, 2008; Tucciarone, 2008). Those in marketing employ innovative strategies to sense what students value as they make choices along their educational paths, thereby serving as the cocreators of their educational experiences. The role these students play is known as the cocreation of value, which is comprised of students' collaborative, interactive, and participatory experiences that provide researchers the opportunity to use students' choice of engagements in designing effective communication and marketing strategies (Chalcraft & Hughes, 2015; Dollinger et al., 2018; Elsharnouby, 2015; Fagerstrøm & Ghinea, 2013; Fiaz et al., 2019; Guilbault, 2016; Mahajan & Golahit, 2019; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2000, 2003; Smørvik &

Vespestad, 2020). Still, what community college students value or engage in, and what factors influence their choices, has remained understudied.

Most often, researchers have examined the potential untapped market of adult learners by delving into these learners' enrollment decisions, risk factors, student barriers, motivation and learning experiences, and impacts on institutional policy issues (Culliver, 2015; Fairchild, 2003; Frey, 2007; Horn & Carroll, 1996; Johnson, 2008; Justice & Dornan, 2001; Juskiewicz, 2020; Kasworm, 2016; Kim, 2002; Knowles et al., 2020; Landrum, 2018; Leggins, 2021; Merriam, 2018; Ritt, 2008; Schuetze & Slowey, 2002; Zamanou, 1993). Community colleges, which have experienced steady declines of adult learner populations, have sought to shift marketing strategies to effectively appeal to this target market (Hanover Research, 2022b; Juskiewicz, 2020; Lumina Foundation, 2023; ODHE, 2022c; Person et al., 2020; RNL, 2019, 2021; Weissman, 2021). Despite such an effort, scholarship surrounding the combination of marketing strategies and value factors that appeal to adult learner populations in community colleges remains limited. This study aimed to fill existing research gaps by exploring what promotional marketing strategies, primary ways of gathering information, and other value factors appeal to diverse adult learner groups enrolled in community colleges. The 7P marketing mix guided the research (Indeed, 2022; Landrum, 2018).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to identify promotional marketing strategies and other value factors that appeal to diverse adult learner groups enrolled in community colleges, and to analyze the influence of these marketing strategies on adult learners' satisfaction with their decisions to enroll in a community college. I focused on adult learners enrolled in community colleges in the state of Ohio, as Ohio provided an important example of a state that had recently

developed statewide initiatives geared toward increasing adult learner postsecondary educational attainment levels (ODHE, 2020, 2022a). At the time of this study, Ohio policymakers had also demonstrably encouraged adult enrollment at community colleges throughout the state. In 2017, Ohio's Department of Higher Education (ODHE) identified a statewide educational goal that 65% of Ohioans between the ages of 25 and 64 would earn a college credential by the year 2025 (Lumina Foundation, 2023; ODHE, 2022c). In 2018, Ohio participated as one of the Lumina Foundation's Adult Promise states and awarded two public community colleges \$50,000 to address adult learners' needs (ODHE, 2020, 2022a). In 2019, key stakeholders from communities across the state of Ohio formed the Adult Learner Working Group, which published Ohio's *Finish for Your Future* report highlighting the importance of shifting postsecondary education systems to meet the needs of adult learners 25 years and older (ODHE, 2022a). ODHE has published ongoing initiatives to reach nearly 3 million adults aged 25–64 that include public college and university completion plans, reenrollment and engagement working groups devoted to examining underserved populations and alternative credit options for adults, and an external public–private coalition known as Complete to Compete Ohio (ODHE, 2022c).

The following research questions guided the study:

Research Question 1: What promotional marketing strategies and value factors appeal to the adult learners enrolled at a community college?

Research Question 2: What are the primary ways in which adult learners gather information about community colleges?

Research Question 3: Does adult learners' satisfaction with their decision to enroll in a community college differ by age, gender, enrollment, and employment status?

Research Question 4: What is the relationship between promotional marketing strategies, value factors, ways of gathering information about community colleges and adult learners' satisfaction with their decision to enroll in a community college?

Research Question 5: What influence, if any, do promotional marketing strategies, value factor preferences, and ways of gathering information about community colleges have on adult learners' satisfaction with their decision to enroll in a community college?

### **Significance of the Study**

This study aimed to contribute to both higher education research and practice. The research yielded insights into how students aged 25 and older prefer to use and engage with information when learning about community colleges. The study examined adult learner demographics (i.e., age groups, gender, enrollment, and employment status) to determine if there are significant differences when marketing to this population. Additionally, this study evaluated what aspects of a community college adult learners tend to find most valuable, which may have influenced their decision to enroll. The study referred to these aspects as community college value factor preferences. In addition, this study aimed to shed light on the influence of promotional marketing strategies, value factors, and ways adult learners gather information about community colleges on adult learners' satisfaction with their decision to enroll in a community college. Finally, the study aimed to offer empirical evidence from community colleges in the state of Ohio—a state that had spearheaded initiatives regarding the promotion and support of adult learners in community colleges (Lumina Foundation, 2023; ODHE, 2022c).

In this study, I examined adult learners enrolled at community colleges in the state of Ohio using a 7P marketing mix that included price, promotion, people, product, place, process, and physical evidence. The 7P marketing mix served as the theoretical foundation that offers

credibility to higher education institutions for practical use. Administrators, enrollment managers, and marketing and recruitment teams can use the results of this study to market, recruit, and retain more adult learners at community colleges using a variety of preferred promotional marketing strategies, value factor preferences, and means of gathering information to be included in comprehensive strategic marketing plans. The findings of the study complement and contribute to the ongoing initiatives of national and state organizations, policymakers, stakeholders, and education departments aimed at increasing adult learners' postsecondary education attainment levels to 60% or more by 2025; the study aimed to provide empirical evidence about the factors influencing students' decisions to enroll in community colleges (NCES, 2021; ODHE, 2020, 2022a).

### **Research Design and Methodology**

I chose a quantitative research design for this study as the most appropriate design (a) to determine the differences between demographic adult learner groups in relation to their satisfaction with their decision to enroll in a community college; (b) to analyze the relationship between promotional marketing strategies, value factors, and ways of gathering information; and (c) to explore the creation of a regression model to discover what factors, if any, influence adult learners' satisfaction with their decisions to enroll in community college. Quantitative research examines the relationships, influences, or patterns among and between variables to answer research questions and hypotheses by using a variety of instruments, including surveys and experiments (Banta & Palomba, 2015; Creswell, 2014).

In this study, I used survey research design to collect and analyze various demographic information to segment the adult learner population based on age groups, gender, enrollment, and employment status. A nonprobability sampling method drew a purposive sample of adult

learners, who were 25 years or older, enrolled for the Spring 2023 semester of the 2022–2023 academic year in 1 of 7 Ohio community colleges. The examination was an ex post facto study, so responses to questions were limited to activities or engagements that had already taken place. The survey instrument collected responses at one time in the academic year to describe adult learners' post evaluation of their overall satisfaction with their decisions to enroll, and explored what promotional marketing, value, and information gathering factors, if any, had influence on this satisfaction.

### **Delimitations**

For the purposes of this quantitative research study, I delimited the study to community colleges and adult learners aged 25 and older enrolled in select 2-year community colleges in Ohio. The study did not involve the assessment of academic programs, student services, or student success rates specific to any of the community colleges involved in the study.

### **Limitations**

One limitation of quantitative survey design is that the survey questionnaire does not provide an opportunity to speak directly with participants to ask follow-up questions that may further explain their answers to each question. Next, although the study aimed to include pertinent promotional marketing strategies that researchers had identified previously, additional factors specific to institutions may not have been included in the survey responses. In addition, as characteristic for survey design, there was no opportunity for participants to answer the questions in depth to determine if there were any additional influences of what adult learners may find preferable or valuable.

Additional limitations to the study further related to the survey design. First, the study was an ex post facto study, so the survey instrument collected responses at one time after

students had already enrolled; as a result, responses to questions were limited to activities or engagements that had already taken place. Next, the survey collected data at one point in time during a single semester; therefore, adult learner responses to certain variables such as age, enrollment, and employment demographics could have changed over the course of the semester or academic year. Furthermore, an additional limitation included the final dataset having a bias that resulted in approximately 60% of the respondents being female and 40% being male, along with a disproportional response of respondents from rural colleges compared to urban community colleges. The adult learners enrolled in an Ohio community college completed a voluntary, online questionnaire. Given this format, accessibility of computer or online devices, along with comprehension of using an online survey tool, may have posed an additional limitation to the study for those who were unfamiliar. A final limitation to the study related to the generalizability of findings to all community colleges in the United States. Because the study's sample of adult learners came from the state of Ohio, conclusions regarding other states and their institutions must be done cautiously.

### **Assumptions**

There were several assumptions inherent in the design of this study. First, an assumption in this research was that those who responded to the survey engaged in at least one promotional marketing strategy prior to enrolling at the community college. Second, I held the assumption that those who chose not to respond would have given the same responses to survey questions as those who did respond. A third assumption to this research was that all participants read and comprehended the survey and questions, and the respondents answered the survey questionnaire honestly.

## **Definitions of Terms**

Adult learners – This term was used interchangeably with nontraditional students (see nontraditional students).

Marketing – “This is the activity, set of institutions, and processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large” (AMA, 2022, para. 2).

Marketing Mix – This refers to 7Ps: price, promotion, product, people, place, process, and physical evidence (CIM, 2015).

Nontraditional students – They include a combination of any of the following factors: 25 years or older, part-time enrollment, full-time employment, financial independence from parents, possible dependents, single parent status, GED or high school diploma, and more than 1 year between high school and college attendance (NCES, 2021).

## **Summary**

This chapter provided an overview of the dissertation, including the background and scope of the research; statement of the problem; significance of the study; research questions; assumptions, limitations, and delimitations; and definitions of the terms used throughout the study. The next chapter provides a review of existing literature surrounding the research related to the study, which included principles of marketing strategies and higher education, the 7P marketing mix, evaluation of satisfaction and value with marketing, adult learners in higher education, community college enrollment trends and marketing research, and the state of Ohio.



## **Chapter Two**

### **Literature Review**

The purpose of the study was to identify promotional marketing strategies and other value factors that appeal to diverse adult learner groups enrolled in community colleges, and to analyze the influence of these marketing strategies on adult learners' satisfaction with their decisions to enroll in community college. This chapter provides a review of research related to the principles of marketing strategies and higher education, the 7P marketing mix, evaluation of satisfaction and value with marketing, adult learners in higher education, community college enrollment trends and marketing research, and the state of Ohio.

#### **Principles of Marketing Strategies and Higher Education**

In the mid-1980s, increased competition among colleges and universities introduced the idea of marketing into academia (Filip, 2012). Authors have defined marketing in numerous ways. According to the American Marketing Association (AMA, 2022), marketing is “the activity, set of institutions, and processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large” (para. 2). Kotler and Fox (1995), notable scholars regarding strategic marketing in higher education, defined marketing as:

The analysis, planning, implementation, and control of carefully formulated programs designed to bring about voluntary exchanges of values with target markets to achieve institutional objectives. Marketing involves designing the institution's offerings to meet the target markets' needs and desires, and using effective pricing, communication, and distribution to inform, motivate, and service these markets. (p. 6)

Higher education institutions have sought to find unique ways to differentiate themselves from other institutions by creating comprehensive marketing strategies to meet the needs and wants of their prospective students in various markets. Institutions have entire departments dedicated to developing and implementing innovative ways to create brand identity and competitive advantage. Brand identity can be name recognition, a logo, a symbol, a term, or other features that make one seller distinct from their competitors (AMA, 2022). Building brand identity is a way for institutions to be unique, tell their story, and have a competitive advantage that often carries identifiable brand standards of distinct images and associations in one's mind, such as (a) The Ohio State University's mascot, Brutus; (b) the esteemed reputation of Harvard University; or (c) the capitalized yellow M to represent the University of Michigan (AMA, 2022; Judson et al., 2008).

The idea of marketing a product or service is no longer applicable just for corporations. Higher education officials have increasingly placed their focus and funding on marketing tactics to stay competitive and attract prospective students (Edmiston-Strasser, 2009). Scholars have examined communication media and promotional tactics that are widely used by college and university administrators across the United States to determine their effectiveness (Edmiston-Strasser, 2009; Judson et al., 2008). Judson et al. (2008) surveyed university marketing and recruitment administrators at public and private universities to determine the impact of their respective university's brand on internal campus constituents. The researchers found university brochures have the biggest impact on their work initiatives and are the preferred marketing strategy of distributing a brand message to internal audiences (Judson et al., 2008). Edmiston-Strasser (2009) conducted a study to measure how marketing and communication processes were structured in higher education institutions using a framework described as the four stages of

integrated marketing communications to guide the research. Using a mixed-methods approach, surveys, and interviews with senior marketing and communication officers at leading public higher education institutions in the United States, the results indicated internal leadership and formal communication were integral factors in strengthening the institutional brand (Edmiston-Strasser, 2009). Relatedly, Harrison-Walker (2009) described what should be included in a positioning strategy used by colleges and universities. Findings indicated identifying competitors, determining how competitors may be perceived, and assessing the positions of competitors, along with analyzing student populations and monitoring institutional position to adjust marketing strategies, made up a comprehensive positioning strategy (Harrison-Walker, 2009).

As higher education institutions have become increasingly competitive, the use of brand identity, image criteria, and positioning strategy to attract prospective students has grown (Dollinger et al., 2018; Fiaz et al., 2019; Kotler & Fox, 1995; Sung & Yang, 2008). Sung and Yang (2008) explored how institutional image and image-related constructs influenced the attitude of 1st-year university students who had limited direct experience with a private university in South Korea. Findings stressed (a) the ways in which an institution is valued and perceived by others, (b) perceived external prestige, and (c) communications framed favorably around university characteristics all fostered students' supportive attitudes toward the institution (Sung & Yang, 2008). Similarly, Ho and Hung (2008) surveyed 14 universities from different areas in Taiwan regarding institutional images. Their findings indicated five principal factors influenced students when selecting their institution of choice: employability, curriculum, academic reputation, faculty, and research environment (Ho & Hung, 2008).

In recent years, higher education marketing and recruitment teams have turned their attention to the internet and social media platforms to increase engagement and maintain high-quality relationships to maintain a competitive advantage (del Rocío Bonilla et al., 2020; Dollinger et al., 2018; Fiaz et al., 2019). Digital and mobile technology has revolutionized marketing by providing segmented, targeted, relevant, and effective ways to reach consumers, specifically prospective students (AMA, 2020; Chartered Institute of Marketing [CIM], 2015). Many higher education institutions use search engine optimization marketing tactics to reach and engage their prospective student applicant pool (Mentz & Whiteside, 2003). Mentz and Whiteside (2003) discussed the importance of websites for colleges and universities, arguing the effective use of college or university websites can play a significant role in attracting prospective students. These websites should include a clear-cut admission process laid out for students; highlights of the institution's benefits, value, and success stories; and cost and financial support opportunities that are easily accessible for students (Mentz & Whiteside, 2003). del Rocío Bonilla et al. (2020) examined levels of behavioral engagement on Instagram, the social media platform, to evaluate whether that particular social network warranted a channel of user-brand communication for higher education institutions. del Rocío Bonilla et al. found marketing administrators at higher education institutions should use social networks to maintain consistent communication strategies and monitor successful patterns to expand and foster valuable relationships with their constituents.

Marketing strategists focus on best practices that every company, including higher education institutions, need to conduct; these practices include identifying customers, understanding customers' needs and preferences, and navigating factors that influence customers' decision making to engage with products or services (CIM, 2015; Kotler & Fox,

1995). Such analysis of internal and external environments could assist in identifying potential marketing opportunities for higher education institutions based on their positions and market segmentation (Ho & Hung, 2008; Kotler & Fox, 1995). Ho and Hung (2008) referenced Sarvary and Elberse's (1995) earlier research that posited successful marketing strategies include market segmentation, target market selection, product positioning, and efforts may be segmented on specific characteristics such as gender, age, or geography, but it needs to be connected to the customer.

### ***Marketing and Community Colleges***

Scholars in the late 1970s and early 1980s indicated many community college leaders sought to maintain innovation and respond to their communities' needs by using initiative-taking positions regarding diverse demographics, various student barriers, and advances in technology (Clagett, 2012; Kotler & Goldgehn, 1981). The researchers of this period outlined the community college sector's struggles with declining enrollments, marketplace changes, increased costs, lack of funding sources, and increased competition from other colleges and universities—along with workforce demands, military service, and hands-on job training programs (Kotler & Goldgehn, 1981). To understand these challenges, early scholars presented certain processes that community colleges considered prior to launching marketing campaigns to incorporate more methodical approaches to meet the needs of their target markets (Kotler & Goldgehn, 1981). Additional researchers argued community colleges served diverse audiences and struggled with their missions; therefore, devoting resources could be costly to the institutions if not rigorously evaluated for effectiveness (Ralph, 1981; Richardson, 1981). Amid increased scrutiny of these various efforts, scholars underscored the value of pursuing market research,

segmenting target markets, and reviewing college choice factors of students enrolled in community colleges (Absher & Crawford, 1996; Clagget, 2012; Tucciarone, 2008).

Kotler and Goldgehn (1981) presented an eight-step process that community college administrators should consider before launching and devoting resources to a marketing strategy. The process included (a) defining the mission, (b) identifying publics and markets, (c) researching the market, (d) segmenting the market, (e) choosing the target markets, (f) determining market position, (g) formulating the marketing mix (i.e., product, price, place, and promotion), and (h) implementing and controlling the marketing plan (Kotler & Goldgehn, 1981). Ralph (1981) argued community colleges tried to be “all things to all people” (p. 107), so the public viewed community colleges with confusion regarding their intent and purpose. Ralph stressed the future of community colleges would be shaped by increased interactions with a wide range of community groups in social, political, and economic environments. According to Ralph, community colleges could enhance their positioning by incorporating appropriate marketing strategies but must continue to evaluate their return on investment as it related to the college and those that it served.

Taking a similar lens, Richardson (1981) argued the public has continued to experience confusion regarding the community college mission, their priorities regarding the groups they serve, and the prohibitive cost of efforts to evaluate the external environment and market. Richardson pointed to community colleges’ limited resources and stated employing marketing strategies on various activities or programs would be at the expense of other factors at the college (e.g., faculty and staff) and could be counterproductive to institutional mission. More research surrounding effective marketing strategies used in community colleges would convince

opponents that comprehensive marketing planning was necessary at such institutions of higher education (Richardson, 1981).

Absher and Crawford (1996) stressed the need for community college administrators to evaluate their campus markets by specific market segments. To accomplish this objective, Absher and Crawford explored what, if any, college choice factors influenced community college students; the researchers included factors such as location, academic programs, faculty, advice from others, reputation, promotional activities, and job placement services in the study. Guided by earlier research, Absher and Crawford identified a total of 29 community college selection factors and administered a survey questionnaire to a randomly selected sample of students currently enrolled at four community colleges located in the northern region in the state of Alabama. The purpose of the research was to determine what market segments existed among community college students based on the selection factors, and findings segmented students into five distinct groups: (a) practical-minded, (b) advice seekers, (c) campus magnets, (d) good timers, and (e) warm friendlies (Absher & Crawford, 1996). Absher and Crawford (1996) concluded, “A target market approach will help community college administrators in designing programs and communications efforts to attract and maintain a desirable student population” (p. 66).

Tucciarone (2008) discussed the necessity for community college personnel to conduct research on their prospective customers and to segment these populations into target markets. Tucciarone stated the goal of advertising in a community college is to persuade prospective students to enroll. Community colleges tend to have an open-door admission policy that relies on student enrollments and various advertising strategies that may serve as successful promotional prospects, such as institutional rebranding, the use of multiple media outlets, signage,

sponsorship and billboard opportunities in the community, Hollywood movies, and print media (Tucciarone, 2008).

Clagett (2012) underscored the value of market research when developing a comprehensive community college marketing and enrollment management plan to meet the needs of multiple constituencies they served. According to Clagett (2012), the goals of a marketing plan “that is well integrated into an institution’s enrollment management strategy are largely the enrollment management goals themselves: to achieve desire enrollment targets, realize budgeted tuition and fee revenue assumptions, and obtain projected retention and graduation rates” (p. 50). For Clagett, data can play a role regarding marketing decisions. Community colleges can use demographic, labor market research, surveys, competitor analysis, and qualitative data (e.g., focus groups) to gather information that develops an effective marketing strategy. Institutional research departments can subsequently provide support to marketing departments by providing data on market needs from environmental scans; conducting target market segmentation; and collecting other institutional data that can analyze product, pricing, messaging, and media choices (Clagett, 2012). As earlier research indicated, Clagett also asserted the need for marketing plans to have proper evaluation for effectiveness; therefore, explicit micro and macro metrics should be incorporated to ensure marketing effectiveness and accountability. Micro metrics include measurements that may be associated with specific marketing efforts such as individual responses to advertisements, publications, inquiry cards, social media outlets, and overall enrollment numbers. Macro metrics include measurements associated to goals and purposes of the credit and noncredit programs that the marketing efforts support (Clagett, 2012). Macro metrics may also include marketing efforts to currently enrolled students to encourage persistence and retention rates at the community college.



Beyond becoming more than simply open-access institutions, community college leaders must also embrace the need to make more concerted efforts in redeveloping their brand identities as missions become highly focused on degree and certificate attainment and on micro credentials to meet workforce demands (Finkel, 2018). Finkel (2018) examined community colleges that explored the rebranding process involving internal and external stakeholders. According to Finkel, community college leaders often explored rebranding efforts to maintain a competitive advantage in the marketplace; others gained new leadership that warranted a change in marketing strategy and were part of state-level community college systems with unique brands that required uniformity and specific identity. Regardless of the reasoning, Finkel highlighted that success was well-grounded in data and research and the need to obtain buy-in from various internal and external constituents. Examining data and research did not just apply to prospective and currently enrolled students, but also to marketing professionals and the strategies used in higher education.

Martin (2016) studied how community college marketing professionals allocated institutional resources that may impact students' college choice processes. Martin conducted a qualitative case study analyzing participants from seven community colleges located in the state of Texas using interviews, field notes, and documents. Findings stressed the importance of marketing administrators' abilities to assess the effectiveness of various marketing efforts used toward increasing student enrollment in community colleges. Additionally, to garner support for marketing strategies, Martin argued administrators need to obtain feedback from internal and external constituents and allocate resources based on the mission and needs of the respective institution.

### ***Marketing and Enrollment Decisions***

There is an abundance of research surrounding students' enrollment decisions in higher education institutions; however, research has remained limited regarding the influences of marketing strategies on their enrollment decisions (Culliver, 2015; Hernandez, 2017; Landrum, 2018; Martin, 2016; Quatroche, 2004; Tucciarone, 2008). To address this gap, scholars have begun to develop college choice processes and models, along with enrollment patterns of adult learners (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Perna, 2006; Stein et al., 2011). Researchers have also explored advertising, marketing, and promotional tactics that resulted in factors that influenced students' decisions to enroll (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Culliver, 2015; Hernandez, 2017; Landrum, 2018; Martin, 2016; Perna, 2006; Quatroche, 2004; Stein et al., 2011; Tucciarone, 2008).

Early researchers, Cabrera and La Nasa (2000), illustrated the impact of an economic and sociological approach to college choice with their three-stage process: (a) predispositions with parental encouragement and support; (b) the search process, including educational, occupational, and socioeconomic status aspirations; and (c) the choice process. The choice process included perceived institutional attributes such as campus life, availability and distance, and funding capabilities. Cabrera and La Nasa argued the choice process starts as early as seventh grade and extends through high school graduation. Other researchers (e.g., Perna, 2006) have explored the influence of cultural, economic, and social capital surrounding access and choice as such capital relates to income, socioeconomic status, and racial or ethnic groups on choosing a college or university. Perna (2006) expanded upon Becker's (1962) economic model of human capital investment theory, which provided a cost-benefit analysis approach made by students when considering investing in their education to increase their earning potential and expand their

career aspirations. Perna presented a conceptual model of student college choice that included human capital investment foundations, but incorporated the notion that students' values and beliefs determined their educational decisions and shaped one's views—providing a better understanding among family and racial/ethnic groups.

To address a gap in the literature regarding the enrollment patterns of adult learners, Stein et al. (2011) focused on a five-factor model (i.e., the PRISM-T decision model for adult enrollment) that better explained students' decisions to enroll and how the model may predict adult learner enrollment. The researchers examined several factors that adult learners consider when determining whether to enroll in workforce development programs such as possibilities for intellectual, personal, and career opportunities; institutional support; synchronization of learning and earning; and academic reputation (Stein et al., 2011). Findings suggested adult learners do not decide to enroll in a postsecondary credential program simply due to a desire or need; rather, they do so after evaluating their commitment based on interactions regarding their situations, occupations, and the institutions under consideration (Stein et al., 2011).

The research surrounding the influence of marketing strategies on enrollment decisions in higher education is limited; however, scholars have explored (a) advertising, marketing, and promotional tactics that influence students' decisions to inquire, complete an application, pursue a degree, and enroll in a college or university; (b) the messaging that may align with various markets; and (c) the effectiveness of tactics based on those used most widely by marketing administrators in higher education (Culliver, 2015; Hernandez, 2017; Landrum, 2018; Martin, 2016; Quatroche, 2004; Tucciarone, 2008). Quatroche (2004) employed a quantitative survey research design to evaluate the relationship between community college choice factors and promotional marketing methods of contacting students enrolled at three State University of New

York community colleges located in western New York. Quatroche presented a survey questionnaire to all new incoming students during their fall registration at each of the locations. The survey asked students questions related to the reasons they chose to attend the community college, what promotional marketing methods of contact they preferred to obtain information about the college, and which methods they found useful and most influential in their decisions to enroll at the institution of choice (Quatroche, 2004). Quatroche also evaluated the students based on their gender, age, race, and income levels. The findings indicated most segments of students preferred direct mail, brochures, and radio advertisements with messaging regarding affordability, convenience, and accessible location. Additionally, Quatroche found significant differences among the students' preferences regarding age ranges, gender, and ethnicity—further indicating the need for target marketing for segmented groups.

Tucciarone (2008) conducted a qualitative study to examine the effects of advertising on students' search and community college choices. Using Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) three-stage model for college choice (i.e., predisposition, search, and choice), 42 formerly enrolled students from St. Louis Community College in the state of Missouri took part in the study (Tucciarone, 2008). A focus group garnered answers to questions related to the effects of advertising used by St. Louis Community College and what influenced the students' predispositions upon high school graduation, their search options, and their decisions to enroll (Tucciarone, 2008). Findings indicated the external influences of parents, friends, school counselors, cost, and location were extremely persuasive in the search and choice process; however, advertising tactics were just as persuasive in reinforcing word-of-mouth messaging and could have impacted their decisions to enroll (Tucciarone, 2008).

Culliver (2015) conducted a study that was guided by human capital investment theory and Perna's (2006) conceptual model of student college choice. The study aimed to examine the relationship between university advertising and marketing techniques that included electronic, traditional, and word-of-mouth marketing methods and the characteristics and motivations of nontraditional students who decided to enroll into a bachelor's degree program. Culliver used a quantitative survey research design to evaluate nontraditional students recently enrolled at 1 of 4 private universities in the state of California that had not yet completed a full semester of coursework (Culliver, 2015). Findings indicated that exposure to specific marketing materials used by higher education institutions varied, but the influence of tactics (e.g., word-of-mouth) was most important to the adult learner population and specific ethnic/racial groups when compared to traditional undergraduate students (Culliver, 2015). Future implications suggested further evaluation of marketing methods to reach nontraditional students are warranted given their varying motivations to enroll.

Amid an unstable economy and fluctuating community college enrollment, Hernandez (2017) sought to measure the impact of marketing content in advertising and promotional efforts on enrollment at a community college in the southwest suburbs of Chicago, Illinois. The purpose of the study was to determine whether implementing a content marketing campaign was worth the return on investment that led to increased enrollment when launched at a community college. Hernandez conducted a quantitative study using survey research design to determine the effectiveness of the community college's advertising and promotions in relation to students' decisions to take additional action steps in the enrollment process, such as filling out inquiry forms, applying for admission, and registering for classes. The research included prospective students who responded to a marketing tactic at the community college, along with currently

enrolled students (Hernandez, 2017). An online, 10-question, Likert-type survey was designed to evaluate what, if any, call to action the students took to engage in the college's enrollment process. Hernandez reviewed currently enrolled and prospective students in various age groups and enrollment status (i.e., full time or part time). Findings indicated there were statistically significant differences regarding the call to action taken by students as they related to specific marketing tactics evaluated (Hernandez, 2017).

Landrum (2018) examined a variety of marketing factors that influenced nontraditional students' enrollment decisions to pursue a bachelor's degree at a university in the state of Indiana. Landrum's research was guided by a 7P marketing mix (i.e., product, price, place, promotion, process, people, and physical evidence) and Knowles's (1984) theory of andragogy, an approach to learning for nontraditional students (Knowles et al., 2020; Landrum, 2018). A survey questionnaire evaluated nontraditional students working at local manufacturing companies and influences that were associated with their decisions to enroll such as programs, institutional rankings, convenience, and accessibility (Landrum, 2018).

### **7P Marketing Mix**

Developing a successful marketing strategy involves employing a marketing model that meets the needs of the company and the product or service they are trying to promote (Landrum, 2018). The most widely used marketing models and concepts for predicting consumer behavior, company growth potential, and revenue projections include SWOT and TOWS analyses (i.e., strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats); 7P marketing mix; segmentation, targeting and position; Porter's five forces; AIDA (i.e., awareness, interest, desire and action); Ansoff matrix; growth-share matrix; SOSTAC (i.e., situation, objectives, strategy, tactics, action and control); The McKinsey 7-S model; and product life cycle (Indeed, 2022; Landrum, 2018).

Introduced by Borden in 1964, the marketing mix theory has gradually evolved and dispersed throughout various disciplines, significantly altering the field of marketing (Filip, 2012; Havel et al., 1996; Landrum, 2018). In 1981, Booms and Bitner expanded the major components of the marketing mix, also known worldwide as the 4Ps of marketing (i.e., product, price, place, and promotion), into a 7P model and included factors such as process, people, and physical evidence (Mahajan & Golahit, 2019). Kotler and Fox (1995) later adapted the 7Ps to replace product with program, as higher education institutions provide a service to the students. Marketing scholars have agreed that to implement the most effective comprehensive marketing strategy that serves various target markets, including adult learners, higher education institutions need to understand the role and importance of the marketing mix factors (CIM, 2015; Ivy, 2008; Kotler & Fox, 1995).

Kotler and Fox (1995) argued that marketing is not just the advertising and promotion of goods and services, but rather, it requires a comprehension of all factors that may influence constituents' decisions. To better serve various target markets, those at higher education institutions need to understand the role and importance of the marketing mix components that offer the most effective comprehensive marketing strategy (CIM, 2015; Ivy, 2008; Kotler & Fox, 1995). Ivy (2008) stated, "It consists of everything that the university can do to influence the demand for the services that it offers" (p. 289).

When combined, each component of the 7P marketing mix (price, product, promotion, people, place, process, and physical evidence) makes up a comprehensive marketing strategy (CIM, 2015). The price component of the marketing mix is what the customers are willing to pay for the product. In the higher education discipline, price refers to the tuition and fees associated with the product students are pursuing. Earning a quality education for an affordable cost is a key

element in the marketing mix, as tuition costs can be what differentiates competitive advantage, brand identity and image, and positioning (Filip, 2012; Mahajan & Golahit, 2019). The higher the cost of tuition, the higher students' expectations are due to their desire for more value and services provided (Ivy, 2008; Landrum, 2018).

The product component of the marketing mix can be tangible or intangible; it is what the organization sells to the consumer. Researchers have argued the product component in a higher education context could be viewed as the graduates from an institution, and the employers are the consumers (Ivy, 2008); however, most research surrounding the product factor of the mix has viewed this concept in an educational context consisting of the academic programs, degrees, or certificates that are intangible elements of what students seek to buy (Filip, 2012; Ivy 2008; Kotler & Fox, 1995; Mahajan & Golahit, 2019). CIM (2015) explained, "The perfect product provides value for the customer. This value is in the eye of the beholder" (p. 5).

The promotion component of the marketing mix refers to all the tactics a higher education institution uses to market, recruit, and retain students. The promotion factor can consist of advertising, publicity, public relations, and recruitment outreach and activities (e.g., campus tours and visits) associated with attracting prospective students (Filip, 2012; Ivy, 2008; Landrum, 2018; Mahajan & Golahit, 2019). Promotion is the way a higher education institution communicates what sets them apart from others (e.g., affordable, close to home), and what they can offer to prospective students who consider attending (CIM, 2015). Promotion can also maintain continuous dialogue with students, faculty, staff, and other institutional constituents to build awareness and provide vital information to target audiences (Filip, 2012; Landrum, 2018; Mahajan & Golahit, 2019).



The people component of the marketing mix refers to everyone a prospective, current, or alumni may encounter that may make an impression. This network could include recruitment team members, faculty, staff, and peers. Kotler and Fox (1995) believed the education services provided depend not only on the people who deliver the service, but also on those for whom the service is provided. The people component can be a key factor for influencing students' perceptions, satisfaction, value, and enrollment (Filip, 2012; Ivy, 2008; Landrum, 2018; Mahajan & Golahit, 2019).

The place component of the marketing mix refers to the delivery method the higher education institution uses to provide the product to the students. The place can be the development of the modes of delivery of the product, such as in-person, hybrid, or online courses. It can also be the place in which educational information and support materials are available such as virtual learning environments using platforms such as Blackboard, Webex, or Zoom (Filip, 2012; Ivy, 2008; Mahajan & Golahit, 2019).

The process component of the marketing mix refers to the students' experiences from recruitment through graduation. This component refers to all activities from admissions, to enrollment, to teaching and learning, to support services, and to student engagement. It can refer to ease of registration, financial aid assistance, accommodations, and faculty–staff interaction (Filip, 2012; Ivy, 2008; Landrum, 2018; Mahajan & Golahit, 2019). The process component stresses the potential value of a strong first impression on a prospective student (CIM, 2015).

The physical evidence component of the marketing mix is tangible in nature and offers students the chance to see firsthand where and what they will physically experience. Physical evidence includes college and university locations, building infrastructures, classrooms, technology, and equipment to amenities (e.g., athletic and fitness centers), dining and residence

halls, and campus grounds and study spaces (Filip, 2012; Ivy, 2008; Landrum, 2018; Mahajan & Golahit, 2019). Researchers have used these factors of the marketing mix to examine relationships related to students' performance, satisfaction, and referral acts; the attitudes and opinions toward marketing initiatives in business schools in South Africa; ways to evaluate higher education system efficiency and effectiveness; and the decisions of nontraditional students to enroll in a university (Filip, 2012; Ivy, 2008; Landrum, 2018; Mahajan & Golahit, 2019).

Ivy (2008) conducted a quantitative single cross-sectional study to over 500 newly registered Master of Business Administration (MBA) students enrolled in subsidized business schools across South Africa. The purpose of the research was to measure MBA students' attitudes and the importance of 25 various marketing tools to which they were exposed when selecting the business school in which they enrolled (Ivy, 2008). Ivy developed a highly structured questionnaire using a 5-point Likert scale to measure attitudes toward various marketing tools such as size of MBA classes, reputation of academic staff, computer laboratories, tuition fees, direct mail received, and information sessions students may have attended. The main elements from the traditional 4P marketing mix included the key elements (i.e., program, price, people, promotion) in the model for data analysis, while also proposing three additional factors (i.e., premiums, considerations that acted as incentives or added value in the students' eyes; prominence, reputation of academic staff and university; and prospectus, direct mail, or brochures; Ivy, 2008). All seven factors, when combined, created a new 7P business school marketing mix for higher education research to use when marketing to prospective MBA students (Ivy, 2008).

Filip (2012) further contributed to the literature by examining whether the 7P marketing mix is a viable option for the higher education system in Romania, and for other European countries to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of universities' educational activities. Filip conducted a systematic and critical analysis of secondary source information, books, articles, and practical research in the Romanian region. Findings indicated the use of all 7P marketing mix components was a reputable solution to improve system efficiency and effectiveness, including a positive connection between marketing theory and higher education practice (Filip, 2012).

Landrum (2018) explored the relationship between the 7P marketing mix and the perceptions, characteristics, and choices of nontraditional students who were working professionals at 1 of 3 manufacturing companies affiliated with Subaru in the state of Indiana. Landrum employed survey research design to collect the opinions of over 140 nontraditional students considering furthering their education with a bachelor's degree at a university. Findings indicated the marketing mix factors of process and product were vital to this population (Landrum, 2018). The quality, accessibility of programs, interest of national ranking of the university, and the ease of user-friendly online information were most influential factors in the students' decision-making processes. The (a) location of the university in relation to their work or home and (b) flexibility of course scheduling was also extremely valuable to the nontraditional students surveyed (Landrum, 2018).

Mahajan and Golahit (2019) conducted a quantitative study using survey research design to examine the relationships of an 11P service marketing mix as inputs and outputs in terms of student performance, satisfaction, and referral acts within higher and technical education institutions situated in the Khandesh region of India. Students enrolled in their 1st, 2nd, 3rd, or final years of study completed a 53-item survey questionnaire (Mahajan & Golahit, 2019). The

service marketing mix used all factors included in the traditional 7P marketing mix (i.e., people, price, product, program, promotion, physical evidence, and process; Mahajan & Golahit, 2019). Mahajan and Golahit (2019) argued previous studies had used a traditional 7P marketing mix but lacked emphasis on the role the marketing mix could play to incorporate service outputs; therefore, four additional factors included as service outputs to measure customer satisfaction, service performance, and service recommendations. According to Mahajan and Golahit (2019), “Incorporating 11 Ps in TE settings ensures value-based outcome” (p. 20). Findings indicated the use of the traditional marketing mix was still viable, but institutions should consider adding prominence, performance, pleasure, and pointing out as additional inputs and service outputs for future evaluation (Mahajan & Golahit, 2019).

### **Evaluating Satisfaction and Value with Marketing**

The notion that consumers are solely in need of a product or service to meet their needs has evolved into a growing demand for a more collaborative, interactive, and participatory experience by consumers as they engage with products or services (Smørvik & Vespestad, 2020). The shift for consumers to take a more active role in the products and services in which they desire to engage is also applicable to college and university students in 2023 (Chalcraft & Hughes, 2015; Dollinger et al., 2018; Elsharnouby, 2015; Fagerstrøm & Ghinea, 2013; Fiaz et al., 2019; Guilbault, 2016; Mahajan & Golahit, 2019; Smørvik & Vespestad, 2020). Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2000) discussed the evolution and transformation of customers as they shifted from a passive audience in the 1970s–1990s to more active players as cocreators of value beginning in the 21st century. Companies viewed customers as a more individual statistic in a transaction (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2000). Advances in technology and digitization has positioned companies to shift marketing strategies in innovative ways to accommodate

immediate customer feedback; amid this shift, customers engage in strategies that show what they value most (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2000, 2003). Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2003) found consumers wanted to exercise their influence and had a desire to interact with companies. This evolutionary interaction became known as “the locus of co-creation (and co-extraction) of value creation” (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004, p. 6).

In the business industry, companies no longer must view the customer as always being right or having a firm-centric view; rather, they must recognize their customers are connected, well informed, empowered, and active consumers of their products and services (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2003, 2004). Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004) argued the cocreation of value exists when there is a joint interaction of dialogue, access, risk benefits, and transparency between the company and the consumer. As an example, the healthcare industry has evolved over time, creating a much more interactive doctor–patient experience (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). Patients have access to more information, including electronic medical records, and can have an ongoing dialogue with their doctors via electronic and video platforms. Patients play an active role in their healthcare experience and cocreate what they find valuable. Similarly, students have taken a more active role in what they choose to engage in before, during, and upon graduation at their respective educational institutions.

The cocreation of value has also surfaced in the context of higher education. Prospective and current students play a more collaborative and active role in their educational experiences. Scholars have interpreted what students value primarily from the active role they play in their interactions with their higher education institutions (Elsharnouby, 2015). According to Kotler and Fox (1995), “In general, customers estimate the value of each choice they have, and select the alternative that will deliver the most value” (p. 42). Chalcraft and Hughes (2015) discussed

the role of the student and referred to the changing landscape of increased access and collaboration as the higher education “servicescape” (p. 1). According to them, higher education institutions needed to have a better understanding of students’ aspirations, expectations, and goals if they desired to increase enrollment (Chalcraft & Hughes, 2015).

Researchers have used the cocreation of value to evaluate marketing and recruitment efforts in higher education. Mahajan and Golahit (2019) stressed the importance of relationship marketing in their findings regarding the use of the 11P marketing mix on students enrolled at higher and technical education institutions in India. Acknowledging students, faculty, staff, and alumni as partners in a cocreated system allowed students to serve as coproducers in their responsibility for participation and performance (Mahajan & Golahit, 2019). Using social media marketing, a private Norwegian university explored the value of interacting with prospective applicants versus using a traditional passive campaign to measure its effectiveness (Fagerstrøm & Ghinea, 2013). Results of the study indicated the dialogue between applicants and a designated contact person in the social media group prompted more discussion and comfort among the active applicants and demonstrated success (Fagerstrøm & Ghinea, 2013).

The impact of social media marketing can be effective, but costly; therefore, colleges and universities must continue to review their return on investment. Researchers have examined the effect of customer value cocreation behavior to investigate the impact of social media marketing activities on university brand image and reputation (Dollinger et al., 2018; Fiaz et al., 2019). Fiaz et al. (2019) designed a conceptual model that indicated value cocreation had partial mediation among the social media marketing activities at three universities in Pakistan.

According to Kotler and Fox (1995), “Most educational institutions want to be more effective, but they are not sure how to proceed. Focusing on enhancing customer satisfaction and

customer value is a good place to begin” (p. 41). Research has built upon the theory of cocreation of value in higher education to develop additional conceptual models to evaluate students’ satisfaction with their university experiences based on reputation, faculty competency, quality of interactions with staff and students, and how students’ cocreation behavior influenced their overall satisfaction with their university experience (Elliott & Healy, 2001; Elsharnouby, 2015). Important aspects of a student’s education experience, as identified in the Noel-Levitz Student Satisfaction Inventory survey—which included factors such as student centeredness, campus climate, and instructional effectiveness—played a vital role in their satisfaction (Elliott & Healy, 2001). Elliott and Healy’s (2001) research suggested that emphasizing such aspects in marketing and recruitment methods could contribute to the retainment of student populations.

Scholars have explored value cocreation in a teaching–learning context to understand students’ perceptions of learning (Guilbault, 2016; Smørvik & Vespestad, 2020). Students saw themselves as active cocreators, which resulted in them playing an active role in their educational experiences and providing insight into what they found most valuable in the teaching–learning environment (Guilbault, 2016; Smørvik & Vespestad, 2020). Dollinger et al. (2018) designed a model of value cocreation that incorporated the ideas of coproduction and value-in-use. Coproduction is comprised of knowledge sharing, equity, and interaction, and value-in-use measures students’ value proposition through their experiences, personalization, and relationships with the institution (Dollinger et al., 2018; Mahajan & Golahit, 2019). Coproduction and value-in-use are both indicators of the benefits to cocreating value in higher education (Dollinger et al., 2018). Satisfaction and value are unique to each student, but higher education research has demonstrated that by evaluating what students choose to engage in and

measuring their expectations via satisfaction levels can provide insight into target market segments for marketing purposes.

### **Adult Learners in Higher Education**

Early research between the 1960s and 1980s focused heavily on traditional-aged White college students between 18–22 years of age, who attended a residential campus full time and shared a common student learning experience; the research often explored these students' development and interactions in and outside the classroom with peers and faculty (Terenzini & Pascarella, 1998). Terenzini and Pascarella (1998) maintained much of this early literature in higher education focused on the impact of colleges and universities on traditional college students. This research, according to Terenzini and Pascarella, could be summarized into two categories: (a) general effects, research that investigated a particular experience or affiliation (e.g., athletics, Greek life, institutional choice); and (b) conditional effects, research that examined experiences that may vary in magnitude for diverse student populations. A diversifying prospective student age population has warranted further research into the everchanging undergraduate student population, with particular focus on those students who may attend college part time, commute, enroll at community colleges, be employed while in attendance, and have family or personal obligations while pursuing degree completion (Fairchild, 2003; Juskiewicz, 2020; Kim, 2002; Terenzini & Pascarella, 1998).

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) examines enrollment trends for traditional and nontraditional students enrolled in postsecondary institutions each year by collecting, analyzing, and reporting data related to education in the United States. According to existing statistics and scholarship, college students, usually between the ages of 18–24 (i.e., traditional students) typically follow a straight path through their college degree, mostly



characterized as enrolling in a college or university immediately upon completion of high school and attending as a full-time student through graduation (Horn & Carroll, 1996; Juskiewicz, 2020; Ohio's Department of Higher Education [ODHE], 2020; Terenzini & Pascarella, 1998). The traditional college student has begun to be more of the exception rather than the rule for most U.S. students, as many students have professional and personal responsibilities and obligations preventing them from attending full time or living on-campus at a college or university (Horn & Carroll, 1996; Fairchild, 2003; ODHE, 2020; Terenzini & Pascarella, 1998). Over the last 20 years, many students have intended to complete a degree or certificate, but the reality is that more than 37 million students left a college or university before completing (Sheffer et al., 2020). NCES provides a definition of nontraditional college students that includes characteristics capturing a combination of any of the following factors: 25 years or older, part-time enrollment, full-time employment, financial independence from parents, possible dependents, single parents, GED or high school diploma, and more than 1 year between high school and college attendance (Horn & Carroll, 1996; Juskiewicz, 2020; Kim, 2002; Melchiorre & Johnson, 2017; NCES, 2021; Sheffer et al., 2020; Terenzini & Pascarella, 1998).

Increasingly, the potential untapped market of prospective students that exists among those adult learners 25 years and older has loomed before higher education institutions. Scholars have started to delve deeper into this population to examine enrollment decisions, risk factors, student barriers, motivation and learning experiences, student identities, needs and expectations, and impacts on institutional policy issues (Culliver, 2015; Fairchild, 2003; Frey, 2007; Horn & Carroll, 1996; Johnson, 2008; Justice & Dornan, 2001; Juskiewicz, 2020; Kasworm, 2016; Kim, 2002; Knowles et al., 2020; Landrum, 2018; Leggins, 2021; Merriam, 2018; Ritt, 2008; Schuetze & Slowey, 2002; Sheffer et al., 2020; Zamanou, 1993).

Knowles, also known as the father of andragogy, first introduced the theory of andragogy in the early 1970s in the first edition of *The Adult Learner* (Knowles et al., 2020; Merriam, 2018). The theory of andragogy presents a transactional model for learning specific to adult learners that includes six core principles researchers can use and adapt: (a) the adult learner's need to know, (b) self-concept, (b) prior experiences, (c) readiness to learn, (d) orientation to learning, and (e) motivation to learn (Knowles et al., 2020; Merriam, 2018). Adult learners may have different motivations to enroll compared to traditional-aged college students and may impact intrinsic and cognitive development in adulthood (Justice & Dornan, 2001). Scholars have reaffirmed earlier studies surrounding differences in the motivation and learning processes of adult learners, with many indicating adult learners tend to have increased cognitive strategies toward learning and course performance in higher education institutions (Justice & Dornan, 2001; Knowles et al., 2020; Merriam, 2018). Researchers have also demonstrated that adult learners respond differently to specific marketing factors that may impact their motivations or decisions to enroll in a bachelor's degree program at a public or private university (Culliver, 2015; Kim, 2002; Landrum, 2018). Scholars have examined the use of marketing mix models, human capital investment theory, conceptual models of student college choice, and the PRISM-T decision model for adult enrollment to review and predict the enrollment decisions of adult learners in higher education (Culliver, 2015; Landrum, 2018; Stein et al., 2011).

Additionally, scholars have identified potential risk factors affecting adult learners' enrollment, persistence, and degree attainment in colleges and universities using specific attributes such as age, gender, and ethnicity (Horn & Carroll, 1996; Kim, 2002). To have a better understanding of adult learners' needs and expectations for support services, community colleges have designed effective programs and services that address the barriers these students face (Frey,

2007; Horn & Carroll, 1996; Kim, 2002; Zamanou, 1993). Fairchild (2003) maintained that adult students assume multiple roles in their lives that can pose potential situational, dispositional, and institutional barriers. Situational barriers include the multiple roles and demands these adult students face in their lives while trying to attend college, such as home, family, employment, and financial obligations (Fairchild, 2003; Zamanou, 1993). Life demands and insufficient time to attend college may present dispositional barriers, and inadequate support services geared toward adult learners in higher education institutions may similarly present institutional barriers that make it challenging for adult learners to be successful (Fairchild, 2003; Zamanou, 1993).

Zamanou (1993) discussed the important reasons nontraditional students may have to return to school, such as career advancement or change, life transitions, or expanding social activities. The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) designed an Adult Learning Focused Institution Assessment Toolkit that offered 2-year colleges a guide to address programs and services that meet the needs of adult learners (Frey, 2007). The toolkit consisted of assessments of faculty members' and administrations' perceptions of institutional adult learner programming called Institutional Self-Assessment Survey (Frey, 2007). The toolkit also included an assessment that measured adult learners' perceptions of their experiences, called Adult Learner Inventory, developed in conjunction with Noel-Levitz—a leader in higher education survey research (Frey, 2007). Community college campuses used the toolkit to address accessibility to affordable education, transferability, and increased support services (e.g., counseling and advising) that impacted the needs of adult learners enrolled in community colleges (Frey, 2007).

Due to the flexibility in remote and online options for students to pursue postsecondary education, adult learners tend to explore their options and want as much information as possible on their pathway toward degree completion—including career and degree road maps; flexible

evening, weekend, and online schedules; and support services specific to their needs (e.g., childcare; Frey, 2007; Leggins, 2021; Sheffer et al., 2020). Scholars have offered recommendations or strategies to promote adult learner enrollment, such as policymaking initiatives, financial support, credit transferability, credit for life experiences, degree pathway maps, customized support services, and website and digital engagement strategies (Kim, 2002; Johnson, 2008; Ritt, 2008).

Researchers have examined additional factors such as adult student identity and student success (Babineau & Packard, 2006; Kasworm, 2016). Babineau and Packard (2006) conducted quantitative survey design research of 70 community college students at 1 of 2 urban community colleges located in New England. The researchers examined the identity processes impacting adult students when they returned to college (Babineau & Packard, 2006). Findings concluded there was potential that adult learners may be reclaiming their past selves from adolescence or constructing new selves in their present situations. Relatedly, Kasworm (2016) explored the cultural and social mediation of adult students in a community college classroom. The adult students described their learning engagement in the community college classroom and its relationship to their broader life involvements, as well as how their perceptions of involvement in the community college environment impacted their identities (Kasworm, 2016). Adult students enrolled in intergenerational community college classrooms outlined positional and relational identities that were influenced by actors they encountered, the structure of the college classroom, and the college itself (Justice & Dornan, 2001; Kasworm, 2016).

This growing number of adult learners is not limited to the United States; Schuetze and Slowey (2002) examined the adult learner population and its impact on institutional and policy issues that appeared to either inhibit or support participation of nontraditional learners across 10

countries: Austria, Australia, Canada, Germany, Ireland, Japan, New Zealand, Sweden, United Kingdom, and the United States. Schuetze and Slowey found adult learners had a variety of social, economic, and cultural reasons for participating in postsecondary education, and institutional personnel reviewed these changing demographics routinely to diversify and increase their marketization of their higher education systems. Higher education institutions also reviewed ways to measure the attitudes of targeted groups of adult learners enrolled in MBA programs and the importance of various marketing tools to which they were exposed when selecting a business school in South Africa (Ivy, 2008).

Sheffer et al. (2020) discussed the early implications of the COVID-19 global pandemic on college and universities, along with the opportunities to engage adult learners to return to college and complete their degrees, also known as the “comebackers” (p. 9). Adult learners may fall into the “potential completers” category that the National Student Clearinghouse defined as “students who had completed at least two years’ worth of enrollment but had not earned a degree” (Sheffer et al., 2020, p. 10). Using a mixed-methods research approach to evaluate adult learners who were considering completing their college degree, Sheffer et al.’s findings indicated those ages 40 and older had a desired interest in doing so and needed to see and hear the value of clear degree pathways toward degree attainment.

### **Community College Enrollment Trends and Marketing Research**

In recent years, analysts have placed their focus on the ramifications of the COVID-19 global pandemic on colleges and universities and on student populations nationwide (American Association of Community Colleges [AACC], 2019, 2022a, 2022b; Brock & Slater, 2021; Gallup, 2022; Hanover Research, 2022a, 2022b; Juskiewicz, 2020; Weissman, 2021). According to Weissman (2021), college and university enrollments declined more than 3% from

Fall 2019 compared to Fall 2020, totaling over 650,00 students nationwide. According to Gallup (2022), “A key driver of enrollment rate changes nationally is the shrinking 18- to 24-year-old population” (p. 23). The enrollment of 18- to 24-year-olds reached its peak in 2013, but according to Census data, approximately 1.5 million fewer people in this age range were enrolled as of 2020 (Gallup, 2022). Since their peak in 2007, those students 17 years old and younger have also experienced declines; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported an approximate 700,000 decline in this population between 2007 and 2020 (Gallup, 2022). Additionally, colleges and universities experienced a drastic decline in the number of employees employed at their respective institutions during what economists have referred to as the “great resignation,” a period which may have impacted teaching and learning and support services for adult learners (Hanover Research, 2022b; Weissman, 2021).

Faced with a public health crisis, college and university personnel had to quickly pivot to what researchers thought was going to be a temporary shift in delivery methods of instruction, declining enrollments of incoming students, and decreases in student retention rates (Hanover Research, 2022b; Weissman, 2021). Some public 4-year and private for-profit institutions even experienced enrollment increases amid the pandemic; many higher education officials thought due to high unemployment rates and the state of the U.S. economy, enrollments at 2-year institutions would soar, as was the case historically (Jenkins & Fink, 2020; Juskiewicz, 2020). Community colleges tend to provide affordable, close-to-home pathways toward workforce training and 4-year degrees to students of all ages; yet, public 2-year institutions and adult learner student populations were among the hardest hit during the pandemic (AACC, 2022b; Weissman, 2021). The fact is that higher education institutions, particularly community colleges, were already experiencing steady enrollment declines prior to 2020, so the COVID-19 global

pandemic exacerbated an already concerning reality of declining prospective student markets (AACC, 2019; Jenkins & Fink, 2020; Juszkievicz, 2020; Knox, 2022; Weissman, 2021).

### ***Community Colleges***

Dating back nearly 100 years with the establishment of the first U.S. publicly funded higher education institution, Joliet Junior College, community colleges have subsequently evolved to provide affordable, quality educational opportunities close to home in communities across the United States (AACC, 2022b; Brock & Slater, 2021). Located in every state and nearly all major cities, community colleges serve as a local resource for adult learners to obtain a postsecondary credential to enhance their employability and potential earnings (Brock & Slater, 2021). AACC (2019), an advocacy organization for more than 1,000 degree-granting community colleges nationwide, examined (a) an annual Fall Enrollment Survey, (b) high school enrollment data from NCES, and (c) unemployment and labor market information from the Bureau of Labor Statistics to report on enrollment trends in community colleges over a 17-year period between Fall 2001 through Fall 2017 (AACC, 2019). In the early part of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, enrollments at community colleges experienced slow, albeit steady increases annually, resulting in a 2.8% increase in total enrollment from 2001 through 2006 (AACC, 2019). Although there exist many driving forces for community college enrollment (e.g., birth rates, high school graduation rates, age, gender, ethnicity), research has demonstrated that national unemployment rates have a strong relationship and can be an indicator of community college enrollment (AACC, 2019; Gallup, 2022). Economists have similarly reported the Great Recession began in December 2007, with solid job growth apparent through 2011 (AACC, 2019; Juszkievicz, 2020). The lingering effects of the Great Recession on the U.S. economy and high unemployment rates positively impacted community college enrollment, which increased to more than 8 million

students enrolled in Fall 2010 at its height—resulting in a 14.4% increase over the course of 7 years (AACC, 2019).

Community colleges receive revenue from various sources such as tuition and fees, federal and state funding, and other external funding sources such as local tax levies and institutional donors (AACC, 2022a). Revenue is frequently determined by full-time equivalency (FTE), a calculation used for full-time enrollment of students that is equivalent to one FTE. As such, students enrolled part-time account for a fraction of FTE funding based on credit-hour enrollment (AACC, 2019). Following the enrollment surge in community colleges in 2010, FTE enrollment continued to experience declines versus the overall headcount of students enrolled; the AACC (2019) concluded in “ratio of full-time students steadily decreased to a low of 36.6% in 2017” (p. 3), thereby impacting revenue sources driven by FTE enrollment at many community colleges nationwide.

Additionally, scholars have indicated that a diversifying prospective student age population and other attributes impacted the various ways higher education institutions reach and serve student populations, including adult learners (Babineau & Packard, 2006; Culliver, 2015; Fairchild, 2003; Frey, 2007; Horn & Carroll, 1996; Johnson, 2008; Justice & Dornan, 2001; Kasworm, 2016; Kim, 2002; Knowles et al., 2020; Landrum, 2018; Melchiorre & Johnson, 2017; Merriam, 2018; ODHE, 2020; Ritt, 2008; Schuetze & Slowey, 2002; Sheffer et al., 2020; Terenzini & Pascarella, 1998; Zamanou, 1993). Through the period of the Great Recession in 2011, community college enrollment of full-time students had experienced increases across all age groups due to high unemployment rates, need for upskilling, and reskilling of displaced workers (AACC, 2019; Juskiewicz, 2020; Knox, 2022). Despite a decrease in the overall total number of traditional-age students due to declining birthrates, traditional students represented a



small proportion of student populations in community colleges, and the FTE of this population has experienced increases since 2011. These enrollment increases are due to rise of high school and dual-enrollment opportunities (AACC, 2019; Gallup, 2022; Jenkins & Fink, 2020; Juskiewicz, 2020). Gallup (2022) argued, “Few births in the U.S. will likely place downward pressure on the number of young adults enrolling in college in 2025” (p. 23).

Between 2011 and 2017, enrollment of community college students (a) 22–29 years old, (b) 30–49 years old, and (c) 50 years of age or older all experienced steady declines; yet, the age group that experienced the largest decrease was that of 30–49-year-olds, which dropped an astounding 34% (AACC, 2019). The decrease in adult learner enrollment was at its highest between Fall 2016 and Fall 2017, which recorded a decline near-double in comparison to traditional-age students (Juskiewicz, 2020). Juskiewicz (2020) examined enrollment and student outcome data from postsecondary institutions released by the U.S. Department of Education and the National Student Clearinghouse to delve into the activities during Fall 2018 and projections of Fall 2019. Overall enrollment in postsecondary institutions continued to see declines in 2018 and 2019 driven primarily by decreases at for-profit and public 2-year institutions (Juskiewicz, 2020). According to Jenkins and Fink (2020), “Adult enrollment in community colleges has declined to the lowest levels in over two decades” (para. 3). As the U.S. economy faced a public health crisis due to the COVID-19 global pandemic, 38 million workers became displaced and filed for unemployment insurance in May 2020—triggering unemployment rates that skyrocketed to over 14% (Juskiewicz, 2020). As Brock and Slater (2021) explained, “The nation experienced job losses across all geographic areas, industries, and occupations except essential retail (such as pharmacies and grocery stores) and nursing” (p. 1).

Historically, community college enrollments have mirrored that of the state of the economy being “countercyclical as the latter goes down, the former goes up” (Juszkiewicz, 2020, p. 17), but the implications of the COVID-19 global pandemic had community college leaders looking for ways to reach a more diverse aging population (Knox, 2022). In Fall 2020, public 2-year institutions experienced a 15% decline in enrollment, a loss of over 700,000 students compared to Fall 2019 (Weissman, 2021). According to Knox (2022), “In spring 2022, community colleges lost another 351,000 students, which equated to a 7.8% decline in enrollment from spring 2021” (para. 2). These declines pointed to social and economic disparities that could trigger long-term effects on the U.S. economy for jobs requiring college degree or credentials (Weissman, 2021). For Brock and Slater (2021), “The economic shock delivered by COVID-19 on the U.S. labor market has been unprecedented” (p. 1). Jenkins and Fink (2020) argued even prior to the COVID-19 global pandemic, many adults were “relegated to contingent, low-wage jobs, and it has been increasingly difficult for such individuals to find the time and resources needed to attend college” (para. 3); therefore, it is even more vital for postsecondary institutions to provide programs and services that meet the needs of adult learners as the economy shifts toward recovery (Brock & Slater, 2021; Hanover, 2022a).

Knox (2022) suggested community colleges should turn their attention to their neighboring higher education competitors in effort to distinguish their marketing positioning by focusing on local business competitors’ needs (e.g., retail, factory fulfillment centers), and opportunities for workforce and community college partnerships. In lieu of community colleges waiting for the students to come to them, higher education institutions should proactively work with local business communities to create pathways and industry credentials that can lead to increased earning potential (Knox, 2022). Knox (2022) argued, “Workforce/community college

partnerships should be in areas that will create opportunities for students to move from earning livable wages to earning middle-class wages” (para. 16). Aligning associate degree pathways and industry credentials with workforce needs may be attractive to those looking to upskill or reskill to increase potential wage earnings. The Lumina Foundation partnered with Gallup in 2021 to conduct research on how higher education institutions could play a vital role in support of upskilling and reskilling adults nationwide (Gallup, 2022). The survey was administered to over 11,000 adults (18 years and older) who had completed high school and either never enrolled at a college or university; were enrolled prior to the COVID-19 global pandemic but stopped out; enrolled during the COVID-19 global pandemic, but were not currently enrolled; or were currently enrolled in a baccalaureate or associate degree program (Gallup, 2022). In *The State of Higher Education 2022 Report*, key findings indicated respondents considered enrolling or reenrolling to pursue associate degrees or industry certificates (Gallup, 2022). According to Gallup (2022), “Associate degree pathways are particularly attractive among those who have stopped out of higher education as more than one-third (37%) of previously enrolled students did so from two-year programs” (p. 9).

In 2022, more than 1,000 community colleges served 6.2 million students pursuing associate degrees, certificates, and or applied baccalaureate degrees (AACC, 2022a). In October 2022, the Community College Research Center (CCRC), the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, and Wheelhouse: The Center for Community College Leadership and Research announced they would partner to examine community college enrollment declines and the recovery strategies used to combat continuous decreases in enrollment during the COVID-19 global pandemic (CCRC, 2022). The research partners planned to analyze the impact of the pandemic on community colleges and to review recovery initiatives, target student groups, and

identify what remains to be addressed in higher education institutions (CCRC, 2022). According to the AACC (2022), 2022 data indicated 65% of community college students were enrolled part time, 60% of them were women, 36% were between the ages of 22–39, and 8% were over the age of 40, with the average college student falling into the adult learner category of 27 years old (AACC, 2022a).

### ***Adult Learners***

Ruffalo Noel Levitz (RNL), a leader in educational enrollment, student success, and fundraising research, administers surveys to public and private 2-year and 4-year higher education institutions annually. In the *2019 Adult Undergraduate Marketing and Recruitment Practices Report for Four-Year Institutions*, where 21 4-year public and 46 4-year private institutions were polled regarding their marketing and recruitment practices toward adult learners, “nearly one in four private and seven in 10 public institutions lack segmented marketing and recruitment plans for adult undergraduate learners” (RNL, 2019, p. 5). Institutions provided their adult undergraduate communication practices and their effectiveness on methods such as email, phone, direct mail, text messaging, and digital and social media advertisements (RNL, 2019). The report also asked institutions to report their usage and effectiveness regarding marketing and advertising strategies, such as information sessions or open houses, web presence, online advertisements, digital strategies, social media, radio, television, and outdoor advertisements (e.g., billboards, busses; RNL, 2019). Unfortunately, the data analysis only included public and private 4-year higher education institutions; therefore, although it provided insight into institutional best practices implemented toward adult learners prior to the COVID-19 global pandemic, it excluded any of the same methods regarding marketing and recruitment practices at 2-year institutions.

RNL (2021) also designed and administered a separate report to 24 2-year institutions throughout the United States to provide insights on institutional best practices regarding marketing and recruitment activities at their respective institutions. The survey was emailed to enrollment and admission officers from accredited, degree-granting institutions to determine their rankings of effectiveness based on the marketing and recruitment methods used by 2-year institutions. RNL detailed the conclusions in the *2020 Marketing and Recruitment Practices: Two-Year Institutions* report and described specific tactics such as (a) high school student search practices; (b) transfer student search practices; (c) family engagement and communication methods to prospective students; and (d) leading outreach for marketing and advertising strategies, including marketing and recruitment digital and in-person methods (RNL, 2021). Marketing and recruitment methods examined in the *2019 Adult Undergraduate Marketing and Recruitment Practices Report for Four-Year Institutions* were outlined in the subsequent *2020 Marketing and Recruitment Practices: Two-Year Institutions*, except for examining strategies specifically targeted toward adult learners (RNL, 2019, 2021). Although intuitive, these best practices reports present an opportunity for further research on marketing strategies' influence on adult learners enrolled at 2-year institutions.

Acknowledging there were almost 170 million individuals in the United States between the ages of 25 and 64 without any type of postsecondary credential in 2017, the Lumina Foundation launched the Adult Promise Initiative, which invested almost \$8 million to provide multiyear funding to 15 states—including the state of Ohio—to increase the proportion of U.S. adults who earn a postsecondary credential to 60% by 2025 (Person et al., 2020). Participating Adult Promise higher education institutions, also known as Adult Promise states, relied on internal focus groups, listening sessions, and surveys to evaluate their own institutional policies

and practices, and engaged adult learners in determining which experiences and perceptions of effective policies, procedures, and services could best meet their needs (Person et al., 2020). Institutions were surveyed on marketing and recruitment tactics that were deemed most effective by their institutional use toward adult students, and adult learners were asked to comment on messaging and support services provided to them (Person et al., 2020). Person et al. (2020) reported that Adult Promise grants were awarded and tracked in 11 states on six categories: state and institutional policy, outreach and recruitment efforts, support services for adult learners, financial assistance, equity considerations, and crisis response. The data that was collected between 2018 and mid-2020 warranted the need for all states to shift their strategic and tactical component changes to accommodate necessary shifts in higher education due to the COVID-19 global pandemic (Person et al., 2020). To address these broader attainment initiatives across 11 states, the researchers used four dimensions to shape state and institutional policies: “(1) the opportunity to serve adults as part of broader statewide attainment initiatives, (2) extent of centralization in the higher education landscape, (3) labor market demands in specific industries, and (4) demographic shifts in the postsecondary population” (Person et al., 2020, p. 3).

Adult Promise states sought to use various outreach and marketing strategies, such as seeking input from adult learners; tailoring outreach materials and messaging; and using various promotional marketing tactics that included digital, print, radio, and television advertisements (Person et al., 2020). Adult Promise states recognized the need to provide specific support services to adult learners due to their various motivations to enroll, desires to link their value and commitment of degree attainment with potential labor market opportunities, and acknowledgement of potential barriers they face (Person et al., 2020). Some states designed flexible scholarships and other funding opportunities to increase financial assistance for adult

learners (Person et al., 2020). To address equity considerations, many Adult Promise states turned to examining disaggregated data, in addition to hiring and training staff to engage and build partnerships with communities of color (Person et al., 2020). As Adult Promise states neared the end of their grant funding, the COVID-19 global pandemic forced participating higher education institutions to deal with the crisis response category by altering their focus to their overall student populations, while maintaining obligations to their adult learners (Person et al., 2020). Regardless of the state of the COVID-19 global pandemic, evaluation has remained ongoing, as Adult Promise states were provided the funding to create long-term foundational and institutional support for adult learners in the attempt to increase postsecondary credentials of this population by 2025.

### **The State of Ohio**

Ranking seventh in total population in the United States, the state of Ohio has nearly 11.7 million people focused in 17 metropolitan regions (Ohio Department of Development, 2020). Metropolitan areas such as Akron, Cincinnati, Columbus, Dayton, Toledo, and Youngstown, Ohio, include more than 500,000 in population in each area (Ohio Department of Development, 2020). The Cleveland-Elyria Metropolitan Statistical Area is the largest area, with over 2 million people (Ohio Department of Development, 2020). Ohio consists of 88 counties, with 14 public 4-year university main campus locations and 23 public 2-year institutions located throughout the state (Lumina Foundation, 2023; Ohio Association of Community Colleges [OACC], 2023; Ohio Department of Development, 2020). According to the Lumina Foundation (2023), “By 2025, 60% of adults in the United States will need some quality credential beyond high school” (para. 3). In 2017, the Ohio Department of Higher Education (ODHE) established a statewide educational goal that 65% of Ohioans between the ages of 25 and 64 would earn a college

degree, certificate, or postsecondary industry credential that is recognized in the workplace by 2025 (ODHE, 2022c). Over the last decade, since 2009, Ohio’s educational attainment rate increased by 14.8% by 2019, although the rate of 49.5% as of 2023 remains lower than the nation’s average of 51.9% (Lumina Foundation, 2023). According to The Ohio Bureau of Labor Market Information, ODHE (2022b) reported “between 2018 and 2028, 75% of job growth in Ohio will be in occupations requiring at least a postsecondary non-degree credential, and 58% of growth will be in occupations requiring a bachelor’s degree or higher” (para. 1). To significantly increase attainment rates, Ohio began to include distinct types of credentials earned beyond a high school diploma in the attainment rate with the addition of short-term certificate programs in 2014 and industry-recognized certificates in 2018 (Lumina Foundation, 2023). Students who earn associate, bachelor’s, and graduate or professional degrees are included in these attainment rates (Lumina Foundation, 2023).

In 2018, while acknowledging a need to improve the state of Ohio’s postsecondary credential attainment level, Ohio participated as one of the Lumina Foundation’s Adult Promise states and grant recipients at five public 2-year and 4-year higher education institutions, which were awarded \$50,000 to address adult learners’ needs (ODHE, 2020, 2022a). In 2019, key stakeholders from communities across the state of Ohio—including leaders from nonprofit groups and organizations, business and industry, and postsecondary educational institutions—came together to form an Adult Learner Working Group that consisted of 40 core team members to support Ohio’s Adult Promise initiative, known as *Finish for Your Future* (ODHE, 2020, 2022a). To address the decreasing number of traditional-age students in the pipeline, Ohio’s *Finish for Your Future* report stressed the importance of shifting postsecondary education systems to meet the needs of adult learners 25 years and older (ODHE, 2022a). ODHE (2022a)



explained “demographers’ projected decline in the number of high school graduates, as well as a record number of projected Baby Boomer retirees, Ohio’s adult education strategy has never been more critical” (p. 7).

The Adult Learner Working Group developed four working subgroups that were charged with “researching, analyzing and recommending strategies to advance improvement of adult learner enrollments and completions” in the following areas: high-impact practices, return on investments, closing equity gaps, and policy improvements (ODHE, 2020; ODHE, 2022a, p. 12). These subgroups comprised their respective data analyses and categorized their recommendations into five pillars that contained 24 recommendations to enhance adult learner success (ODHE 2020, 2022a). Pillar 1 consisted of suggestions that were centered around flexible programming; custom and student-focused onsite and workplace opportunities; and adult-friendly programs to meet the needs of those with external obligations, commitments, and wraparound support services that include pre-enrollment activities and support through completion (ODHE, 2020, 2022a). Pillar 2 included recommendations that acknowledge adult learners bring a variety of valuable knowledge, skills, and experiences when starting or returning to higher education (ODHE, 2020, 2022a). Higher education institutions need to establish policies and practices around prior learning assessments and credit-for-life experiences that can provide adult learners with test-out options. Institutional leaders must also acknowledge the need to expand workforce partnerships and other guaranteed credit for college-level training, such as career technical education and military assurance guides (ODHE, 2020, 2022a).

Pillar 3 provided recommendations based on understanding and closing equity gaps regarding adult learners (ODHE, 2020, 2022a). ODHE (2022a) explained, “Equity requires understanding and providing adult learners with what they need – when they need it – to be

successful” (p. 27). Recommendations included prioritizing equity commitments into college completion plans, offering financial literacy support, and identifying digital barriers (e.g., broadband service, home computers and or digital devices) to offer instructional support or community support (e.g., discounts, devices) to adult learners (ODHE, 2022a). To expand adult learners’ ability to take advantage of postsecondary opportunities, Pillar 4 underscored the importance of identifying and addressing financial barriers of this population (ODHE, 2020, 2022a). Suggestions included establishing (a) statewide initiatives to address outstanding debt forgiveness programs, (b) goals to increasing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid completion rates, and (c) additional scholarships geared toward adult learners (ODHE, 2020, 2022a).

Lastly, Pillar 5 stressed the importance of communication to adult learners by recommending a statewide marketing campaign that reaches those who have never attended a college or university, those who have stopped out, or those who may need reskilling or upskilling to advance their earning potential (ODHE, 2020, 2022a). ODHE (2022a) discussed: “Adults are attracted by marketing materials that are clear about the ‘Return on Investment’ that students will achieve with additional educational credentials” (p. 35). Additional suggestions included creating an annual report to evaluate ongoing data related to adult learners; a centrally located, student friendly portal that provides information on postsecondary institution opportunities; and leadership that is evident to holding respective institutions and related working, advisory, and subgroups accountable to support the needs of Ohio’s adult learners (ODHE, 2020, 2022a).

ODHE has promoted ongoing initiatives to reach nearly 3 million adults ages 25–64 who can meet the statewide goal of 65% of Ohioans earning diverse types of recognized postsecondary credentials (ODHE, 2022c). In addition to *Finish for Your Future*, ODHE requires

all public colleges and universities to submit updated campus completion plans every 2 years to address strategies used to increase the percentage of those respectively enrolled and earning postsecondary credentials (ODHE, 2022c). Additional working groups have been established to focus on (a) improving access and completion for underserved populations; (b) engaging in competency-based education, which considers prior learning and skills in lieu of completing in-class semester hours; and (c) supporting the Re-Engaging Adults in Postsecondary working group to provide recommendations that educate and impact policymakers who can help improve adult learner initiatives (ODHE, 2022c).

A public–private coalition known as Complete to Compete Ohio is comprised of over 40 member organizations across the state of Ohio and highlights the importance of postsecondary education opportunities and credentials by providing commonality with regard to advocacy, communication tools, and research based on best practices (CCO, 2020; ODHE, 2022c). The coalition underscores five vital areas for increasing postsecondary education attainment: value, workforce needs and alignment, access and affordability, academic success and importance of completion, and development of regional partnerships (CCO, 2020; ODHE, 2022c). A detailed plan can be reviewed in the published *Bridging Ohio’s Workforce Gap: A Statewide Action Plan for Increasing Postsecondary Educational Attainment in Ohio* (CCO, 2020; ODHE, 2022c).

Acknowledging that financial barriers exist, and 1.3 million Ohioans had some college credit but had not yet earned a degree, certificate, or industry credential as of 2022, the ODHE established Second Chance and College Comeback grants (ODHE, 2022c). Adult learners who meet the requirements of the grants are offered financial assistance and/or previous institutional debt relief to encourage reenrollment in higher education institutions across the state (ODHE, 2022c).

The state of Ohio consists of large metropolitan areas that include potential untapped markets of adult learners who could pursue postsecondary credentials at their choice of 14 public 4-year university main campus locations and 23 public 2-year institutions (Lumina Foundation, 2023; OACC, 2023; ODD, 2019). Ohio policymakers have begun working with institutions of higher education and public–private stakeholders to address the need to align workforce needs with postsecondary credentials geared toward adult learners (ODHE, 2020, 2022a).

Acknowledging the barriers that exist for populations of adult learners, the state has developed financial incentives to assist in the enrollment and reenrollment of this population (ODHE, 2022c). Although Ohio has identified adult learners as a potential untapped market for higher education institutions, initiatives surrounding promotional marketing strategies, primary ways of gathering information, and other value factors that appeal to diverse adult learner groups enrolled in any of the 23 community colleges remain understudied.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study aimed to address the combination of promotional marketing strategies, primary ways of gathering information, and other value factors that appeal to diverse adult learner groups enrolled in community colleges using a 7P marketing mix. The 7P marketing mix (i.e., price, promotion, people, product, place, process, and physical evidence) served as the theoretical framework and guided the study. Promotional marketing strategies, primary ways of gathering information, and other value factors aligned with each of the 7Ps in the framework. The marketing mix focused on the target market of adult learners enrolled in community colleges in the state of Ohio. Ohio served as the lens into the broader community college sector due to ongoing supported state initiatives geared toward increasing adult learner postsecondary educational attainment levels and the number of institutions located throughout the state.

## **Summary**

This chapter provided a review of existing literature surrounding the research related to the study that included principles of marketing strategies and higher education, 7P marketing mix, evaluation of satisfaction and value with marketing, adult learners in higher education, community college enrollment trends and marketing research, and the state of Ohio. The next chapter describes the research design and process, including the theoretical framework; procedures, including sample and survey instrument; data collection process; and statistical tools used to analyze the data.

## **Chapter Three**

### **Methodology**

The purpose of this study was to identify promotional marketing strategies and other value factors that appeal to diverse adult learner groups enrolled in community colleges, and to analyze the influence of these marketing strategies on the adult learners' satisfaction with their decisions to enroll in a community college. I focused on adult learners enrolled in community colleges in the state of Ohio. Ohio provided an important example of a state that had recently developed statewide initiatives geared toward increasing adult learner postsecondary educational attainment levels and had encouraged adult enrollment at community colleges throughout the state at the time of this study. The following research questions guided the study:

Research Question 1: What promotional marketing strategies and value factors appeal to the adult learners enrolled at a community college?

Research Question 2: What are the primary ways that adult learners gather information about community colleges?

Research Question 3: Does adult learners' satisfaction with their decision to enroll in a community college differ by age, gender, enrollment, and employment status?

Research Question 4: What is the relationship between promotional marketing strategies, value factors, ways of gathering information about community colleges and adult learners' satisfaction with their decision to enroll in a community college?

Research Question 5: What influence, if any, do promotional marketing strategies, value factors, and ways of gathering information about community colleges have on adult learners' satisfaction with their decision to enroll in a community college?

This study followed a quantitative survey research design (a) to determine the differences between demographic adult learner groups in relation to their satisfaction with their decisions to enroll in a community college, (b) to analyze the relationship between promotional marketing strategies, value factors, and ways of gathering information; and (c) to explore the creation of a regression model to discover what factors, if any, influences adult learners' satisfaction with their decisions to enroll in a community college. The 7P marketing mix theoretical framework guided the study. The 7P marketing mix is based on price, promotion, people, product, place, process, and physical evidence (Filip, 2012; Ivy, 2008; Kotler & Fox, 1995; Landrum, 2018; Mahajan & Golahit, 2019). This chapter describes the research design and process, including the theoretical framework; procedures, including sample and survey instrument; the data collection process; and statistical tools used to analyze the data.

### **Survey Research Design**

I chose a quantitative research design for this study as the most appropriate design to determine differences among demographic adult learner groups in relation to their preferences of promotional marketing strategies, value factors, and primary ways that adult learners gather information. I also sought to analyze the relationship between (a) promotional marketing strategies, value factors, and ways of gathering information about community colleges, (b) adult learners' satisfaction with their decisions to enroll, and (c) what combination, if any, may predict enrollment of adult learners in community colleges. Researchers typically use quantitative methods when they are interested in analyzing a larger number of cases that use constructed or predetermined datasets that can be evaluated for reliability and validity (Banta & Palomba, 2015; Creswell, 2014). Quantitative research can be used to examine the relationships, influences, or patterns among and between variables to answer research questions and hypotheses by using a

variety of instruments, including surveys and experiments (Banta & Palomba, 2015; Creswell, 2014).

In this study, I employed a survey research design to collect and analyze a variety of demographic information to segment the population of adult learners based on age groups, gender, enrollment, and employment status. Banta and Palomba (2015) defined surveying as “the process of administering a set of predetermined questions – a questionnaire – to collect information from individuals in a target group about their characteristics, behaviors, attitudes, perceptions, and needs” (p. 121). Surveys are frequently used in higher education research to evaluate various aspects of the college setting and are useful tools from which to draw conclusions in larger populations (Banta & Palomba, 2015; Creswell, 2014; Stage & Manning, 2016). According to Creswell (2014), survey research “provides a quantitative or numeric description of trends, attitudes, or opinions of a population by studying a sample of that population” (p. 42). This study targeted adult learners who had enrolled in a community college in the state of Ohio during the Spring 2023 semester of the 2022–2023 academic year; I sought to identify promotional marketing strategies and other value factors that appealed to diverse adult learner groups enrolled in community colleges, and to analyze the influence of these marketing strategies on the adult learners’ satisfaction with their decisions to enroll in a community college. I focused on adult learners enrolled in community colleges in the state of Ohio, as Ohio provided an important example of a state that had recently developed statewide initiatives geared toward increasing adult learner postsecondary educational attainment levels and had encouraged adult enrollment at community colleges throughout the state.

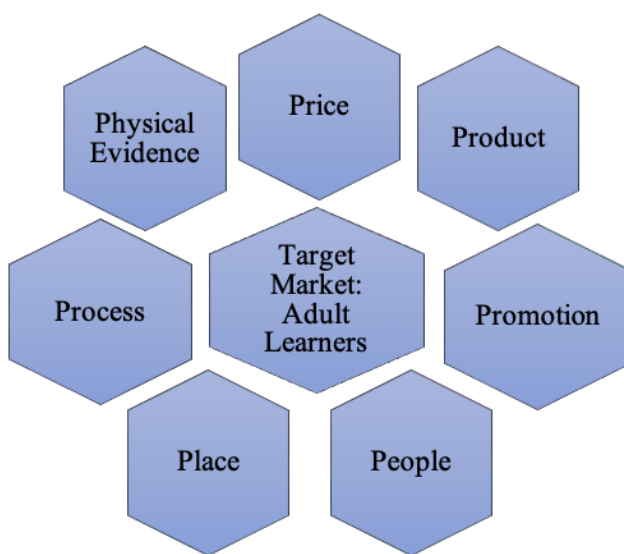


## Theoretical Framework

This exploratory study used a quantitative survey research design guided by the following theoretical 7P marketing mix framework (see Figure 1). The 7P marketing mix is based on price, promotion, people, product, place, process, and physical evidence (Filip, 2012; Ivy, 2008; Kotler & Fox, 1995; Landrum, 2018; Mahajan & Golahit, 2019). Understanding the importance of these marketing mix components can have considerable impact on community college personnel who seek to develop effective marketing strategies geared toward increasing adult learner enrollment.

**Figure 1**

*7Ps Marketing Mix*



The promotion component of the marketing mix provided a lens for the analysis of preferences of promotional contact marketing strategies. The promotion component of the marketing mix refers to all the tactics a higher education institution uses to market, recruit, and retain students. The promotion component can consist of advertising, publicity, public relations, and recruitment outreach and activities associated with attracting prospective students (Filip,

2012; Ivy, 2008; Landrum, 2018; Mahajan & Golahit, 2019). Promotion is the way in which higher education institutions communicate what sets them apart from others and what they can offer to prospective students who consider attending (Chartered Institute of Marketing [CIM], 2015). Promotion can also be used to maintain continuous dialogue among students, faculty, staff, and other institutional constituents to build awareness and provide vital information to target audiences (Filip, 2012; Landrum, 2018; Mahajan & Golahit, 2019). This study used the promotion component of the market mix as a lens to determine differences among demographic adult learner groups in relation to their preferences of 15 promotional marketing strategies of contact such as social media, email, television, live chat, college website, telephone call, text messaging, outdoor advertisements, brochures or direct mail, newspaper, in-person or virtual open house or campus visits, off-campus recruitment events, word-of-mouth recommendation, or one-on-one meetings with a college representative.

Comprehension of additional factors within the marketing mix (e.g., price, people, place, process, product, and physical evidence) may influence adult learners' decisions to enroll at a community college (CIM, 2015; Ivy, 2008; Kotler & Fox, 1995). The remaining six components of the marketing mix provided a lens to evaluate adult learners' decisions to enroll—or, for the purposes of this study, community college value factor preferences. Students take an active role in their educational experiences, and determining the aspects of the community college in which they choose to engage can be interpreted as examples of what they value most when enrolling (Chalcraft & Hughes, 2015; Dollinger et al., 2018; Elsharnouby, 2015; Fagerstrøm & Ghinea, 2013; Fiaz et al., 2019; Guilbault, 2016; Smørvik & Vespestad, 2020). Value can be extracted from the components influencing the students' decisions to enroll, such as campus culture,

interactions with faculty and staff, campus amenities, campus location, affordable tuition, admission standards, transferability of credits, or small class sizes.

The 7P marketing mix provided a framework to evaluate differences among the target market of adult learners and their demographic characteristics to examine their preferences for promotional marketing strategies, value factors, and ways of gathering information. I studied the relationship between them to determine what combination, if any, may predict enrollment of adult learners in community colleges.

### **Data Collection**

The following section provides insight into the sampling method used and a description of the institutions that participated in the study. An explanation of the survey instrument designed including the promotional marketing strategies and value factors that were examined. Lastly, an explanation of the procedures and data analysis conducted that aligned with the study's research questions are provided in detail.

### ***Sample***

This quantitative study used a nonprobability sampling method to draw a purposive sample of adult learners who were 25 years or older and who had enrolled in the Spring 2023 semester of the 2022–2023 academic year in 1 of 7 Ohio community colleges: Columbus State Community College, Cincinnati State Technical and Community College, Lakeland Community College, Lorain County Community College, Marion Technical College, Northwest State Community College, and Stark State College. Institutions participated on a voluntary basis and included a rich history, with some locations in higher populated geographic areas in Ohio (500,000 or more in population), some in more rural locations, and some that had multiple campus locations serving diverse populations of students; in addition, one of these colleges was a

recipient of the Lumina Foundation's Adult Promise grants(Ohio's Department of Higher Education [ODHE], 2022a).

Founded in 1963, Columbus State Community College awards a variety of associate degrees and certificates to more than 45,000 students (Columbus State Community College, 2022). Columbus State Community College has two campuses located in Columbus, Ohio and Delaware, Ohio, along with four additional regional learning centers in Dublin, Ohio; Reynoldsburg, Ohio; southwest Columbus; and Westerville, Ohio (Columbus State Community College, 2022).

Beginning as a public high school with 650 students back in September 1969, Cincinnati State Technical and Community College now serves the community awarding technical degree programs (Cincinnati State Technical and Community College, 2023). Over 50 years later, Cincinnati State Technical and Community College (2023) serves more than 10,000 students annually at four different campus locations. Cincinnati State Technical and Community College offers 130 degree and certificate programs, transfer opportunities, credit and noncredit course offerings, and training for workforce development.

Conceived by a group of 22 Lake County citizens and brought forth by the vote of the people in Spring 1967, Lakeland Community College (2023) first opened its doors to over 1,000 students. From its humble beginnings, Lakeland Community College now awards associate degrees and certificates to over 4,000 students, and provides transfer opportunities, along with credit and noncredit course offerings. Lakeland Community College also partners with 4-year colleges and universities to offer a variety of bachelor's and graduate degree programs on its campus in Kirtland, Ohio.

Established in 1963, Lorain County Community College (2023) offers opportunities for residents to obtain the necessary training and education to advance their needs. Lorain County Community College awards short-term certificates, associate degrees, and bachelor's degrees, along with providing over 170 industry-recognized credentials. Lorain County Community College also partners with 14 Ohio universities and colleges to provide opportunities to complete a bachelor's or master's degree on their campus.

Founded in 1970, Marion Technical College (2023) has served more than 50,000 students, nearly half of whom live in Marion County, Ohio. Marion Technical College awards a variety of associate degrees and certificates to approximately 2,800 students each year. The average student age for Marion Technical College student is 27, with more than half of students enrolled part time, and 60% working while enrolled.

Stark State College (2023), located in Stark County, is the largest among five other colleges and universities located in the county. Stark State College offers more than 220 associate degrees and certificates and has a variety of transfer agreements with other 4-year institutions. Stark State College has multiple satellite centers and off-campus locations in Akron and Canton, Ohio, and enrolls over 10,000 credit-seeking students, with more than 70% of the students employed while in attendance. Stark State College was a recipient of the Lumina Foundation's Adult Promise grants (ODHE, 2022a).

All adult learners (i.e., those 25 years or older) who were enrolled at each of the seven institutions in the Spring 2023 semester of the 2022–2023 academic year were surveyed and examined in the study's sample. This sample provided a diverse representation of adult learners enrolled in community colleges across the state of Ohio and consisted of various demographic subsets that fell under the umbrella of how nontraditional students are defined in higher

education. The selection criteria included all students ages 25 years or older who had not yet earned a degree or certificate in any mode of course delivery and were enrolled either full time or part time during the semester in which I conducted the research.

### ***Survey Instrument***

The purpose of this study was to identify promotional marketing strategies and other value factors that appeal to diverse adult learner groups enrolled in community colleges, and to analyze the influence of these marketing strategies on adult learners' satisfaction with their decisions to enroll in a community college. To collect data, I developed an electronic survey questionnaire using Qualtrics, a survey software design tool. I developed the survey questionnaire (see Appendix) following the main components of the theoretical framework. The theoretical framework that guided the study was the 7P marketing mix, which includes price, promotion, product, place, process, people, and physical evidence. This framework provided a lens to analyze different components when targeting marketing strategies to specific audiences, such as adult learners. I designed the survey questionnaire to evaluate demographic information of adult learners such as age, gender, enrollment, and employment status, along with promotional marketing strategies (see Table 1), and reasons to enroll or community college value factors (see Table 2).

**Table 1**

#### ***Promotional Marketing Strategies***

Marketing mix component	Promotional marketing strategies
Promotion	Social media Email Television Live chat College website Telephone call

Marketing mix component	Promotional marketing strategies
	Text message
	Outdoor billboards or bus advertisements
	Radio application platform
	Music application platform
	Brochures or direct mail
	Newspaper (hard copy or online)
	In-person open house or campus visit
	Virtual open house or campus visit
	Off-campus recruitment activity (e.g., college fair; career fair)
	Word-of-mouth recommendation (e.g., family, friends)
	One-on-one meeting with a college representative or counselor/adviser (e.g., virtual, or in-person appointment)

**Table 2**

*Community College Value Factors*

Marketing mix component	Community college value factors
People	Diversity of campus culture Faculty qualifications or expertise Interaction with college staff
Physical evidence	Campus amenities (e.g., fitness center, childcare center, study spaces) Modern classroom/computer technology
Place	Attractiveness of the college campus Convenient and accessible campus location Delivery of academic program (in-person, online or hybrid) Flexible course offerings (variety of days, times, evening, weekend, online)
Price	Availability of financial aid and scholarships Flexibility of payment options Affordable/low-cost tuition
Process	Admission standards Student support services (tutors, success coaches, accommodations) Job placement services
Product	Campus clubs and organizations Earning potential of academic program Duration to complete the academic program Transferrable credits or pathways Small class sizes

Higher education institutions use many promotional marketing strategies. To ensure that I included promotional marketing strategies of contact that are most widely used by 2-year, accredited, degree-granting institutions, I referred to the *2020 Marketing and Recruitment Practices: Two-Year Institutions* report (Ruffalo Noel Levitz [RNL], 2021). RNL (2021), a leader in higher education enrollment, student success, and fundraising research, administered a survey to 24 2-year institutions throughout the United States to provide insights on institutional best practices regarding marketing and recruitment activities at their respective institutions. I referred to this report as a guide when designing answers on the survey questionnaire specifically related to promotional marketing strategies of contact that adult learners use most often—such as social media platforms, television, email, internet sources, newspaper, text messages, direct mail, and outdoor advertisements (RNL, 2021).

### ***Procedures***

I collected data in two phases. During Phase 1, I conducted a pilot study to detect any areas of concern regarding the accuracy and validity of the survey questionnaire. A link to the online questionnaire was emailed to an instructor teaching an upper division business management course at Lakeland Community College in the Spring 2023 semester. The instructor then emailed the online survey to all 10 students enrolled in the course in advance of the scheduled in-person class meeting, providing the participants an opportunity to read the questions thoroughly and provide anonymous responses. Upon completion, I had an opportunity to speak directly with the participants to evaluate their feedback regarding ease of understanding, phrasing of questions and answers, and potential incentives offered to encourage response rates. All students completed the survey and answered that it was easy to follow, they understood the



questions and response choices, and they recommended the use of Amazon gift cards in any amount to encourage response rates.

In Phase 2, I deployed the online Qualtrics survey questionnaire to adult learners 25 years and older enrolled during the Spring 2023 semester of the 2022–2023 academic year at Columbus State Community College, Cincinnati State Technical and Community College, Lakeland Community College, Lorain County Community College, Marion Technical College, Northwest State Community College, and Stark State College (but who had not yet earned a degree or certificate). Prior to administering the survey, I reached out via email to key administrators in the Ohio Association of Community College's (OACC's) Student Success Center, which assists all 23 Ohio community colleges to “align national and state initiatives with institutional strategies, make data-driven decisions, implement evidence-based practices, and scale whole-college reforms to increase student success” (OACC, 2021, para. 2). I requested their assistance via email in obtaining participation from all 23 community colleges throughout the state of Ohio by asking them to send an email on my behalf to key senior leaders in the institutional research departments at the respective institutions. An OACC representative sent a letter of support to all 23 community colleges' institutional research directors, along with an explanation of the study and online survey questionnaire link—the letter requested the institutional leaders to reply directly to me with their interest in participation. I followed up with each institution via email approximately 1 week later. Overall, eight community colleges across the state of Ohio responded with interest in participating; therefore, I completed the Institutional Review Board (IRB) process through the respective institution that required it and expressed a desire to participate. Once the IRB process was complete, I obtained site approval letters of participation from each community college. I worked with key administrators in the respective

institutional research departments at each community college who had access to pull and target various student populations at their respective institution. The survey was designed, and data were collected electronically through the Qualtrics platform. I worked collaboratively with each institution's institutional research department representative to send an email detailing the request for participation and link to the consent and survey questionnaire. Due to the voluntary, anonymous nature of the survey, I requested each community college email the adult learner listserv at their respective institution on my behalf, and specifically to all adult learners ages 25 years or older whom had not yet earned a degree or certificate, but were enrolled at their respective community college during the Spring 2023 semester of the 2022–2023 academic year. All but one community college was willing to send out the survey via email to their adult learner populations; therefore, a total of seven community colleges participated in this study. The survey instrument respected the participants' anonymity and privacy and did not ask for personally identifiable information from respondents.

To increase the response rate of the survey, upon completion of the survey, each respondent had the ability to click a separate link and provide an email address to be entered to win one of 10 \$50 Amazon gift cards. The entry into the drawing for completion of the survey took each respondent to a separate Qualtrics raffle sign-up link to insert their email address; therefore, entry was not associated with their identifying answers on the survey. The survey remained open for 2 weeks, and I provided each community college with email communications to send out on my behalf as a reminder approximately 1 week after dissemination that included the closure date of the survey questionnaire. Once the survey concluded, I used Qualtrics to export only the Amazon raffle email addresses into Microsoft Excel. Each email address corresponded with a numbered row, and I used a Google random number generator tool to

choose the 10 winners for the incentive. Raffle winners were emailed their \$50 gift card directly from Amazon's website.

## **Data Analysis**

Data were collected using the Qualtrics platform and exported for analysis via the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) statistical software. All 15 survey questions required a response; therefore, the questionnaire consisted of forced-completion questions. The purpose of the forced-completion set up was to eliminate missing data. The survey questionnaire aligned with the research questions guiding the study (see Table 3). Questions 1–5 aimed to collect demographic information to segment the population of adult learners based on age groups, gender, enrollment, and employment status. Using a rating scale from 1 to 5 (e.g., 1 = *Never* to 5 = *Always*), Questions 6 and 7 aimed to identify adult learners' preferences for promotional marketing strategies and ways to gather information about what students heard, saw, or used to obtain information about the community college in which they enrolled. Using a rating scale from 1 to 5 (1 = *Not at All Influential* to 5 = *Very Influential*), Question 8 aimed to identify how adult learners received information and which of those tactics were most influential. Question 9 aimed to collect data that determined what adult learners tended to value most when choosing to enroll at their community college using a rating scale from 1 to 5 (1 = *Not at All Influential* to 5 = *Very Influential*). Question 10 asked respondents to rate how satisfied they were with their overall decision to enroll at the respective community college using a rating scale of 1 to 5 (1 = *Not at All Satisfied* to 5 = *Very Satisfied*).

**Table 3***Survey Questions Aligned With Research Questions*

Survey questions	Research question
Questions 1–5; 10 and 11	Research Question 1: What promotional marketing strategies and value factors appeal to the adult learners enrolled at a community college? Research Question 3: Does adult learners’ satisfaction with their decision to enroll in a community college differ by age, gender, enrollment, and employment status?
Question 9	Research Question 2: What are the primary ways that adult learners gather information about community colleges?
Question 9–14	Research Question 4: What is the relationship between promotional marketing strategies, value factors, ways of gathering information about community colleges and adult learners’ satisfaction with their decision to enroll in a community college?
Question 14	Research Question 5: What influence, if any, do promotional marketing strategies, value factor preferences, and ways of gathering information about community colleges have on adult learners’ satisfaction with their decision to enroll in a community college?

The survey questionnaire asked adult learners to indicate their age in 1 of 6 ranges: 25–29, 30–34, 35–39, 40–44, 45–49, or 50 or more. Respondents were also asked to indicate the gender with which they identified and race or ethnicity (i.e., they could check all applied) that best described them. Additionally, I asked the adult learners to characterize their current enrollment (i.e., part time or full time) and employment status (i.e., part time, full time, or unemployed). These survey questions aimed to collect demographic information to segment the population in data analysis based on diverse age groups, gender, enrollment, and employment status.

The data analysis was organized along my study’s research questions. Research Question 1 asked which promotional marketing strategies and value factors appeal to adult learners. To illustrate the overall student responses, I used descriptive statistics. Descriptive statistical tests in SPSS allowed me to identify and trace differences, if any, among the promotional marketing

strategies and value factors based on demographic information for each category. Descriptive statistical tests provide means, standard deviations, and ranges of scores for the chosen variables (Creswell, 2014).

Research Question 2 evaluated the primary ways in which adult learners gather information about their community college. As in Question 1, Question 2 used descriptive statistical tests in SPSS to provide the differences, if any, among the ways adult learners gather information. This step provided the mean, standard deviations, and ranges of scores for the various variables in which adult learners responded about gathering information (Creswell, 2014).

Research Question 3 determined whether there were differences regarding adult learners' satisfaction with their decisions to enroll. Data were analyzed to determine differences based on diverse age groups, gender, enrollment, and employment status. To analyze the data, I used analysis of variance (ANOVA) statistical testing. An ANOVA can be used to evaluate the means for three or more samples and determine whether there are statistically significant differences (Creswell, 2014; Qualtrics, 2022). ANOVA tests were conducted on each of the demographic categories to determine whether there were statistically significant differences among each of the demographic categories and variables.

Research Question 4 analyzed the relationship between promotional marketing strategies, value factors, ways of gathering information about community colleges, and adult learners' satisfaction with their decisions to enroll in community college. I used Pearson correlations to determine the relationship between value factor preferences, ways of gathering information, and promotional marketing strategies. Pearson correlations provided the significance and direction

between multiple variables measured on an interval or ratio measurement to determine what, if any, relationship existed (Creswell, 2014).

Research Question 5 evaluated what influence, if any, promotional marketing strategies, value factor preferences, and ways of gathering information about community colleges had on adult learners' satisfaction with their decisions to enroll in community college. A multiple regression analysis conducted in SPSS was used as the statistical tool to determine the relationship between the independent or predictor variables (i.e., promotional marketing strategies, value factors, and ways of gathering information) and the dependent, or response, variable of decision to enroll (Creswell, 2014). Multiple regression determines the significance, if any, in relation to the dependent variable or outcome variable, such as overall satisfaction with the decision to enroll in a community college (Creswell, 2014).

### **Delimitations**

For the purposes of this quantitative research study, I delimited the study to community colleges and adult learners ages 25 or older enrolled in participating Ohio 2-year community colleges. The study did not involve the assessment of academic programs, student services, or student success rates specific to any of the community colleges involved in the study.

### **Limitations**

One limitation of quantitative survey design is that the survey questionnaire does not provide an opportunity to speak directly with participants to ask follow-up questions that may further explain their answers to each question. Next, although I aimed to include pertinent promotional marketing strategies that prior research had identified, additional factors specific to institutions may not have been included in the survey responses. In addition, as characteristic of survey design, there was no opportunity for participants to answer the questions in depth to

determine if there were any additional influences of what adult learners may find preferable or valuable.

Additional limitations to the study further related to the survey design. First, the study was an ex post facto study, so the survey instrument collected responses at one time after students had already enrolled; as a result, responses to questions were limited to activities or engagements that had already taken place. Next, the survey collected data at one point in time during the semester; therefore, adult learners' responses to certain variables such as age, enrollment, and employment demographics could have changed over the course of semester. Furthermore, an additional limitation included the final dataset having a bias that resulted in approximately 60% of the respondents being female and 40% being male, along with a disproportional response of respondents from rural colleges compared to urban community colleges.

Adult learners enrolled in Ohio community colleges surveyed completed a voluntary, online questionnaire. Accessibility to computer or online devices, along with respondents' comprehension of using an online survey tool, may have posed additional limitations to the study for those who were unfamiliar. A final limitation to the study related to the generalizability of findings to all community colleges in the country. Because the study's sample of adult learners came from the state of Ohio, conclusions regarding other states and their institutions must be done cautiously.

### **Assumptions**

There were several assumptions inherent in the design of this study. First, an assumption in this research was that those who responded to the survey engaged in at least one promotional marketing strategy prior to enrolling at the community college. Second, I assumed that those who

chose not to respond would have given the same responses to survey questions as those who did respond. Third, I assumed all participants read and comprehended the survey and questions, and the respondents answered the survey questionnaire honestly.

### **Summary**

This chapter discussed the methodology, including the theoretical framework used to guide the study, the research design, sampling, and data collection and analysis processes. Chapter 4 presents the research findings, and Chapter 5 provides discussions, implications for future research, and recommendations.



## **Chapter Four**

### **Analysis of Findings**

The purpose of this study was to identify promotional marketing strategies and other value factors that appeal to diverse adult learner groups enrolled in community colleges, and to analyze the influence of these marketing strategies on adult learners' satisfaction with their decisions to enroll in a community college. I focused on adult learners enrolled in seven community colleges throughout the state of Ohio. The following research questions guided the study:

Research Question 1: What promotional marketing strategies and value factors appeal to the adult learners enrolled at a community college?

Research Question 2: What are the primary ways that adult learners gather information about community colleges?

Research Question 3: Does adult learners' satisfaction with their decision to enroll in a community college differ by age, gender, race and ethnicity, enrollment, and employment status?

Research Question 4: What is the relationship between promotional marketing strategies, value factors, ways of gathering information about community colleges and adult learners' satisfaction with their decision to enroll in a community college?

Research Question 5: What influence, if any, do promotional marketing strategies, value factors, and ways of gathering information about community colleges have on adult learners' satisfaction with their decision to enroll in a community college?

This study followed a quantitative survey research design to determine the differences between demographic adult learner groups in relation to their satisfaction with their decisions to enroll in a community college. I analyzed the relationship between (a) promotional marketing

strategies, (b) value factors, and (c) ways of gathering information, and explored the creation of a regression model to discover what factors, if any, influenced adult learners' satisfaction with their decisions to enroll in community college. The 7P marketing mix served as the theoretical framework guiding the study. The 7P marketing mix is based on price, promotion, people, product, place, process, and physical evidence (Filip, 2012; Ivy, 2008; Kotler & Fox, 1995; Landrum, 2018; Mahajan & Golahit, 2019). This chapter begins with an overview of the data collection field procedures and the population and sample of the study. Next, I present the study's findings from a 15-question online survey questionnaire administered to 13,575 adult learners ages 25 or older enrolled at seven community colleges throughout the state of Ohio, along with the statistical tools used to evaluate the data. Findings are organized to follow the study's research questions and include figures and tables that illustrate the data. The chapter ends with a summary of the delimitations, limitations, and assumptions of the study.

### **Population and Sample**

I administered a 15-question online survey questionnaire developed in Qualtrics to an adult student population aged 25 or older enrolled at seven accredited public community colleges located in the state of Ohio. I worked with representatives at each of the community colleges to email all adult learners enrolled for the Spring 2023 semester of the 2022–2023 academic year. The survey questionnaire reached a total of 13,375 students who were enrolled either part or full time, in any mode of course delivery, and had not yet earned a degree or certificate from the following participating institutions: Columbus State Community College (4,327 students), Cincinnati State Technical and Community College (2,508 students), Lakeland Community College (1,199 students), Lorain County Community College (2,299 students), Marion Technical

College (453 students), Northwest State Community College (492 students), and Stark State College (2,297 students).

The 13,575 adult learners received the survey link through an email inviting them to participate in a voluntary, anonymous online survey. The survey instrument respected participants' anonymity and privacy; I did not collect personally identifiable information from the respondents. The survey remained open for 2 weeks, and one reminder email was sent out on my behalf to all adult learners enrolled at their respective institutions by a representative of each community college's institutional research or marketing department approximately 1 week after the introductory email invitation was sent. At the end of the 2 weeks, I collected a total of 1,321 survey responses, resulting in a 9.7% response rate. All 15 questions on the survey questionnaire followed a forced-completion format, which required a response. Participants could also withdraw at any time. Ultimately, after elimination of all incomplete responses, the final dataset ended up with an 8.5% completion rate, with a total of 1,150 fully completed surveys.

Descriptive statistics (see Table 4) provided a condensed overview of the respondents' characteristics, including age ranges, gender, race and ethnicity, enrollment status, and employment status. The frequencies provided the actual number of participants and the percentage of the sample represented for each variable. The mean, standard deviation, and variance offer insights into the central tendency, variability, and distribution of the variables. Such an overview provides a better understanding of the characteristics of the study's participants.

**Table 4***Descriptive Statistics for Gender, Age, Enrollment Status, and Employment Status*

Variable	<i>n</i>	%	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Variance
Gender			1.28	.52	.27
Female	858	74.6			
Male	272	23.6			
Other	10	.9			
I prefer not to respond.	10	.9			
Age			29.36	5.63	31.68
25–29 years old	332	28.9			
30–34 years old	257	22.3			
35–39 years old	184	16			
40–44 years old	155	13.5			
45–49 years old	96	8.3			
50 years and older	126	11			
Enrollment status			1.35	.48	.23
Part time (Enrolled in less than 12 credit hours)	753	65.5			
Full time (Enrolled in 12 or more credit hours)	397	34.5			
Employment status			4.09	.73	.54
Unemployed	260	22.6			
Full time (I work 40 hours or more per week)	522	45.4			
Part time (I work less than 40 hours per week)	368	32			

There were 1,150 participants: 74.6% female, 23.6% male, 0.9% other, and 0.9% who preferred not to respond. Most of the participants (28.9%) were 25–29 years old, followed by those 30–34 years old (22.3%), whereas the least number of participants were 45–49 years old (8.3%). There were 65.5% of participants enrolled in less than 12 credit hours (i.e., part time), whereas 34.5% were enrolled in 12 or more credit hours (i.e., full time). Regarding employment, 22.6% of participants were unemployed, 45.4% worked 40 hours or more per week (full time), and 32% worked less than 40 hours per week (part time).

The mean age of 29.36 years (see Table 4) represents the average age of the participants in the sample. The standard deviation provided a measure of the dispersion or variability in the ages of the participants. Specifically, the average age deviated from the mean age by

approximately 5.628 years. The moderate standard deviation among the sample indicated the ages among the respondents were not highly dispersed, with most participants' ages falling within a reasonable range of the mean age. The mean gender of 1.28 suggested, on average, participants' gender was female. The standard deviation of 0.521 measured the dispersion or spread of gender responses around the mean code of 1.28. The inclusion of participants who preferred not to disclose their gender suggested diversity and inclusivity in the study.

Regarding enrollment status, 65.5% of participants reported being enrolled part time (i.e., taking less than 12 credit hours), whereas 34.5% were enrolled full time (i.e., taking 12 or more credit hours). The mean enrollment status code of 1.35 ( $SD = 0.476$ ) indicated, on average, participants' enrollment status was part time. Employment status varied, with the largest group reporting working full-time (i.e., 40 hours or more per week). The mean employment status code of 4.09 ( $SD = 0.733$ ) indicated, on average, participants' employment status tended to be closer to full-time employment.

Regarding race and ethnicity, the survey allowed participants to choose multiple ethnicities; results in the total percentage exceeded 100% (see Table 5). Among the respondents, the largest group identified as White/Caucasian (not Hispanic), representing 72.5% of the sample. The second most prevalent group was Black or African American (not Hispanic), comprising 19.6% of the participants. Hispanic/Latinx/Spanish origin accounted for 4.5% of the sample, followed by American Indian/Alaskan Native (0.9%) and Asian/Pacific Islander (2.3%). A smaller percentage (0.1%) identified as Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander. Additionally, 3.5% of participants preferred not to respond to the race/ethnicity question. The inclusion of multiple ethnicities highlighted the diverse backgrounds and cultural representation within the study population.

**Table 5***Race and Ethnicity*

Race/ethnicity	<i>n</i>	%	% of cases
White/Caucasian (not Hispanic)	834	70.2	72.5
Black or African American (not Hispanic)	225	18.9	19.6
Hispanic/Latinx/Spanish origin	52	4.4	4.5
American Indian / Alaskan Native	10	0.8	0.9
Asian/Pacific Islander	26	2.2	2.3
Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander	1	0.1	0.1
Prefer Not to Respond	40	3.4	3.5
Total	1188	100	103.3

Survey participants were asked to choose the primary reason for enrolling at their community college: (a) to earn a certificate or industry credential from this college, (b) to earn an associate degree from this college, (c) to earn an associate degree and then transfer to a 4-year college or university, (d) to enroll in courses to prepare to transfer to a 4-year college or university, (e) to update their job skills, (f) for personal enrichment, or (g) other. Most participants stated they were enrolled to earn an associate degree from the college (51.20%); followed by them wanting to earn an associate degree and then transfer to a 4-year college or university (25.20%) and to earn a certificate or industry credential from the college (11.80%). The least amount of participants enrolled for other reasons (2.40%; see Table 6).

**Table 6***Frequencies for Reason to Enroll*

Reason to enroll	<i>n</i>	%
To earn a certificate or industry credential from this college.	136	11.8
To enroll in courses to prepare to transfer to a 4-year college/university.	37	3.2
To earn an associate degree and then transfer to a 4-year college/university.	290	25.2
To update my job skills.	33	2.9
For personal enrichment.	38	3.3
To earn an associate degree from this college.	589	51.2
Other	27	2.4

## Findings

### *Research Question 1: What Promotional Marketing Strategies and Value Factors Appeal to the Adult Learners Enrolled at a Community College?*

Descriptive statistics guided the summary of responses regarding marketing strategies and value factors for each marketing mix component. The entire sample ( $n = 1,150$ ) was evaluated in the responses. Using a scale from 1 to 6 regarding participants' responses on how often they used specific marketing elements, email was most used by adult learners ( $M = 5.23$ ,  $SD = 1$ ), followed by text messages ( $M = 5.15$ ,  $SD = 1.14$ ), then streaming service providers (e.g., Netflix, Amazon Prime, Hulu, Apple TV;  $M = 4.51$ ,  $SD = 1.45$ ), surf the internet ( $M = 4.49$ ,  $SD = 1.36$ ), and radio or music app platform ( $M = 4.39$ ,  $SD = 1.47$ ). LinkedIn ( $M = 1.96$ ,  $SD = 1.19$ ) and Twitter ( $M = 1.61$ ,  $SD = 1.11$ ) were reported as least used by adult learners (see Table 7).

**Table 7**

*Descriptive Statistics for Specific Marketing Strategies Most Used*

Marketing strategy	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Email	5.23	1.00
Text messages	5.15	1.14
Streaming service provider (e.g., Netflix, Amazon Prime, Hulu, Apple TV)	4.51	1.45
Surf the internet	4.49	1.36
Radio or music app platform	4.39	1.47
YouTube	3.67	1.43
Facebook	3.65	1.65
Online videos	3.25	1.41
Read outdoor advertisements (e.g., billboards, bus ads)	3.18	1.27
Instagram	2.85	1.61
Read brochures or direct mail	2.78	1.28
TikTok	2.62	1.78
Read newspaper or magazines (hard copy or online)	2.60	1.26
Basic cable service provider (e.g., WOW, COX, Spectrum, Direct TV)	2.50	1.85
Snapchat	2.32	1.57

Marketing strategy	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Pinterest	2.31	1.38
Online advertisements	2.16	1.15
LinkedIn	1.96	1.19
Twitter	1.61	1.11

One scale that ranged from 1 to 6 asked participants to respond about how often they saw, heard, or used promotional marketing strategies. The college website emerged as the most used source to obtain information about the community college in which they enrolled ( $M = 4.14$ ,  $SD = 1.44$ ); email followed ( $M = 3.52$ ,  $SD = 1.63$ ); then word-of-mouth recommendation from family, friends, etc. ( $M = 3.12$ ,  $SD = 1.54$ ). The least used strategy was off-campus recruitment activity (e.g., college fair, career fair;  $M = 1.68$ ,  $SD = 1.09$ ) and newspaper (hard copy or online;  $M = 1.56$ ,  $SD = .98$ ; see Table 8).

**Table 8**

*Descriptive Statistics for Promotional Marketing Strategies Used To Obtain Information*

Promotional marketing strategy	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
College website	4.14	1.44
Email	3.52	1.63
Word-of-mouth recommendation from family, friends, etc.	3.12	1.54
One-on-one meeting with a college representative or counselor/adviser (e.g., virtual, or in-person appointment)	2.72	1.42
Social media	2.56	1.43
In-person open house or campus visit	2.46	1.45
Text message	2.35	1.50
Telephone call	2.31	1.42
Brochures or direct mail	2.14	1.22
Outdoor billboards or bus advertisements	2.08	1.23
Virtual open house or campus visit	1.99	1.28
Television	1.98	1.27
Radio app platform	1.78	1.24
Live chat	1.68	1.12



Promotional marketing strategy	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Music app platform	1.68	1.13
Off-campus recruitment activity (e.g., college fair, career fair)	1.68	1.09
Newspaper (hard copy or online)	1.56	.98

Descriptive statistics were used to guide the summary of responses using a scale from 1 to 6 regarding participants' responses on how promotional marketing strategies influenced adult learners' decisions to enroll at their community colleges. The most influential promotional marketing strategy indicated by adult learners was word-of-mouth recommendation from family, friends, etc. ( $M = 3.35$ ,  $SD = 1.86$ ), followed by college website ( $M = 3.26$ ,  $SD = 1.76$ ), then one-on-one meeting with a college representative or counselor/adviser (e.g., virtual, or in-person appointment;  $M = 2.97$ ,  $SD = 1.83$ ). The least influential strategies were live chat ( $M = 1.64$ ,  $SD = 1.16$ ), radio or music app platform ( $M = 1.59$ ,  $SD = 1.09$ ), and newspaper (hard copy or online;  $M = 1.58$ ,  $SD = 1.06$ ; see Table 9).

**Table 9**

*Descriptive Statistics for Influence of Promotional Marketing Strategies: Promotion Marketing Mix*

Promotional marketing strategy	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Word-of-mouth recommendation from family, friends, etc.	3.35	1.86
College website	3.26	1.76
One-on-one meeting with a college representative or counselor/adviser (e.g., virtual, or in-person appointment)	2.97	1.83
In-person open house or campus visit	2.53	1.72
Telephone call	2.16	1.53
Virtual open house or campus visit	2.14	1.54
Email	2.01	1.41
Brochures or direct mail	1.97	1.32
Text message	1.88	1.37
Outdoor billboards or bus advertisements	1.86	1.24
Off-campus recruitment activity (e.g., college fair, career fair)	1.85	1.33

Social media	1.78	1.26
Television	1.67	1.13
Live chat	1.64	1.16
Radio or music app platform	1.59	1.09
Newspaper (hard copy or online)	1.58	1.06

Descriptive statistics guided the summary of responses using a scale from 1 to 6 regarding participants' responses on how value factors aligned with the people, physical evidence, place, price, process, and product marketing mix components influencing their decisions as adult learners to enroll at their community colleges. Among the people marketing component mix, interaction with college staff emerged as the most influential ( $M = 3.38$ ,  $SD = 1.69$ ), followed by faculty qualification or expertise ( $M = 3.32$ ,  $SD = 1.65$ ). The least influential was diversity of campus culture ( $M = 2.67$ ,  $SD = 1.62$ ). Among the physical evidence marketing component mix, modern classroom/computer technology emerged as the most influential ( $M = 3.25$ ,  $SD = 1.68$ ), followed by attractiveness of the college campus ( $M = 2.94$ ,  $SD = 1.62$ ). The least influential was campus amenities (e.g., fitness center, childcare center, study spaces;  $M = 2.54$ ,  $SD = 1.59$ ). Among the place marketing component mix, flexible course offerings emerged as the most influential (e.g., variety of days, times, evening, weekend, or online;  $M = 4.73$ ,  $SD = 1.48$ ), followed by the delivery of academic programs ( $M = 4.11$ ,  $SD = 1.61$ ). The least influential was convenient and accessible campus location ( $M = 4.07$ ,  $SD = 1.66$ ). Among the price marketing mix component, affordable/low-cost tuition emerged as the most influential ( $M = 4.85$ ,  $SD = 1.52$ ), followed by availability of financial aid and scholarships ( $M = 4.31$ ,  $SD = 1.77$ ). The least influential was flexibility of payment options ( $M = 4.07$ ,  $SD = 1.80$ ). Among the process marketing mix component, admission standards emerged as the most influential ( $M = 3.83$ ,  $SD = 1.74$ ), followed by student support services (e.g., tutors, success coaches,

accommodations;  $M = 3.56$ ,  $SD = 1.80$ ), then career services/job placement services ( $M = 3.33$ ,  $SD = 1.81$ ). The least influential was campus clubs and student organizations ( $M = 2.50$ ,  $SD = 1.57$ ). Among the product marketing mix component, transferrable credits or pathways emerged as most influential ( $M = 4.23$ ,  $SD = 1.75$ ), followed by the complete academic program ( $M = 4.10$ ,  $SD = 1.66$ ), then earning potential of academic program ( $M = 3.93$ ,  $SD = 1.76$ ). The least influential was small class sizes ( $M = 3.86$ ,  $SD = 1.75$ ; see Table 10).

**Table 10**

*Descriptive Statistics for Influence of Value Factor Preferences: People, Physical Evidence, Place, Price, Process, and Product Marketing Mix*

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
<b>People</b>		
Diversity of campus culture	2.67	1.62
Faculty qualification or expertise	3.32	1.65
Interaction with college staff	3.38	1.69
<b>Physical evidence</b>		
Campus amenities (e.g., fitness center, childcare center, study spaces)	2.54	1.59
Modern classroom/computer technology	3.25	1.68
Attractiveness of the college campus	2.94	1.62
<b>Place</b>		
Convenient and accessible campus location	4.07	1.66
Delivery of academic programs	4.11	1.61
Flexible course offerings (e.g., variety of days, times, evening, weekend, or online)	4.73	1.48
<b>Price</b>		
Availability of financial aid and scholarships	4.31	1.77
Flexibility of payment options	4.07	1.80
Affordable/low-cost tuition	4.85	1.52
<b>Process</b>		
Admissions standards	3.83	1.74
Student support services (e.g., tutors, success coaches, accommodations)	3.56	1.80
Career services/job placement services	3.33	1.81
Campus clubs and student organizations	2.50	1.57

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Product		
Earning potential of your academic program	3.93	1.76
Duration to complete your academic program	4.10	1.66
Transferrable credits or pathways	4.23	1.75
Small class sizes	3.86	1.75

***Research Question 2: What Are the Primary Ways that Adult Learners Gather Information About Community Colleges?***

Descriptive statistics were used to guide the summary of responses on the primary ways adult learners gather information about community colleges. Using a scale from 1 to 5, participants were asked if promotional marketing materials (i.e., college brochures, magazines, newspapers, direct mail, and website), recruitment initiatives (i.e., college tours, visits, open houses, admission and counselor virtual and in-person appointments), media outreach efforts (i.e., social media, television, outdoor advertisements, and radio/music applications), and marketing communication efforts (i.e., email, live chat, text messages, video messages, and phone calls) played a significant role in their decisions to enroll at their community colleges. Respondents rated recruiting initiatives as most significant ( $M = 2.82$ ,  $SD = 1.46$ ), followed by promotional marketing materials ( $M = 2.73$ ,  $SD = 1.43$ ), then marketing communication efforts ( $M = 2.71$ ,  $SD = 1.46$ ). Media outreach had the lowest significance ( $M = 2.58$ ,  $SD = 1.42$ ; see Table 11).

**Table 11**

*Descriptive Statistics for Influence of Marketing Strategies: Primary Ways of Gathering Information*

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Promotional marketing materials (College brochures, magazines, newspapers, direct mail, and website) played a significant role in the decision to enroll.	2.73	1.43
Recruiting initiatives (College tours, visits, open house, admission, and counselor virtual and in-person appointments) played a significant role in the decision to enroll.	2.82	1.46
Media outreach efforts (social media, television, outdoor advertisements, and radio/music application) played a significant role in decision to enroll.	2.58	1.42
Marketing communication efforts (email, live chat, text, video messages, and phone calls) played a significant role in the decision to enroll.	2.71	1.46
Overall satisfaction with decision to enroll	65.67	.64

***Research Question 3: Does Adult Learners' Satisfaction With Their Decision to Enroll in a Community College Differ by Age, Gender, Race and Ethnicity, Enrollment, and Employment Status?***

To determine whether there were statistically significant differences between groups regarding the overall satisfaction with the decision to enroll, I used the analysis of variance (ANOVA) statistical test. An ANOVA can be used to evaluate the means for three or more samples and determine whether there are statistically significant differences among them (Creswell, 2014; Qualtrics, 2022). Results indicated participants' overall satisfaction with the decision to enroll in a community college did not differ by age ranges, race and ethnicity, and employment status. The Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander race and ethnicity group only had one participant and was excluded from the analysis; however, results suggested overall satisfaction with participants' decisions to enroll in a community college did differ by the gender of participants,  $F[5, 1146] = 9.30, p < .001$ . Post hoc comparisons were completed using the

Games-Howell test to determine which pairwise comparison of means contributed to the overall significant differences, if any. Post hoc comparisons revealed that overall satisfaction with the decision to enroll was indeed higher for female respondents ( $M = 65.72$ ,  $SD = .55$ ) than it was for male respondents ( $M = 65.50$ ,  $SD = .81$ ,  $p < .001$ ; see Table 12).

**Table 12**

*One-Way ANOVA Results: Overall Satisfaction With Decision to Enroll*

Variable	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Age					
25–29 years old	332	65.62	0.67	1.41	0.217
30–34 years old	257	65.69	0.58		
35–39 years old	184	65.62	0.69		
40–44 years old	155	65.68	0.65		
45–49 years old	96	65.7	0.63		
50 years and older	126	65.77	0.49		
Gender					
Female	858	65.72	0.55	9.3	< .001
Male	272	65.5	0.81		
Other	10	65.4	0.69		
I prefer not to respond	10	65.6	1.27		
Employment status					
Unemployed	260	65.62	0.71	1.92	0.147
Full-time (I work 40 hours or more per week)	522	65.7	0.57		
Part-time (I work less than 40 hours per week)	368	65.65	0.68		
Variable	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Race and ethnicity					
White/Caucasian (not Hispanic)	808	65.69	0.59	1.165	0.324
Black or African American (not Hispanic)	217	65.62	0.76		
Hispanic/Latinx/Spanish origin	48	65.77	0.43		
American Indian/Alaskan Native	10	65.6	0.69		
Asian/Pacific Islander	26	65.54	0.71		
Prefer not to respond	40	65.48	.78		

*Note.* Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander group had only one participant and was excluded from the analysis.

Three or more samples are used when evaluating groups with an ANOVA test; therefore, as there were only two groups, an independent samples *t* test was conducted to determine whether there was a difference in overall satisfaction with the decision to enroll in a community college between part-time and full-time enrolled participants (Creswell, 2014; Qualtrics, 2022). The results indicated a nonsignificant difference in overall satisfaction with the decision to enroll between part-time enrolled participants ( $M = 65.65$ ,  $SD = .65$ ) and full-time enrolled participants ( $M = 65.71$ ,  $SD = .61$ ),  $t(1148) = -1.58$ ,  $p = .115$  (see Table 13).

**Table 13**

*Independent Samples *t* Test Results: Overall Satisfaction With Decision to Enroll*

Enrollment status	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Part time (enrolled in less than 12 credit hours)	753	65.65	.65	-1.58	.115
Full time (enrolled in 12 or more credit hours)	397	65.71	.61		

***Research Question 4: What is the Relationship Between Promotional Marketing Strategies, Value Factors, Ways of Gathering Information About Community Colleges and Adult Learners' Satisfaction With Their Decision to Enroll in a Community College?***

Pearson correlations provide the significance and direction between multiple variables measured on an interval or ratio measurement to determine what, if any, relationship exists (Creswell, 2014). I conducted a Pearson correlation coefficient to determine whether there was a relationship between adult learners' overall satisfaction with their decisions to enroll in community college and the 96 variables associated on the survey questionnaire. The Pearson correlation results for all 96 variables were exported into Microsoft Excel to account for

collinearity. Collinearity can occur when variables are linearly dependent on one another and should be reviewed carefully and removed prior to analysis (Goerge & Mallery, 2022). All binary variables were removed, and I conducted a search on all variables that may have a linear relationship ( $r > .85$ ). The results indicated no collinearity among variables.

Upon review of all Pearson correlation coefficients, including binary variables, results denoted 43 out of 96 variables indicated a significant relationship. Several positive correlations were observed in the relationship between numerous factors and overall satisfaction with the decision to enroll in a community college. Highly significant positive correlations at the 0.01 significance level were observed between overall satisfaction with the decision to enroll and several factors. Notably, the most substantial correlations were found with flexible course offerings ( $r = .233$ ), delivery of academic programs ( $r = .228$ ), interaction with college staff ( $r = .192$ ), and faculty qualification or expertise ( $r = .193$ ). Additionally, strong positive associations were evident with availability of financial aid and scholarships ( $r = .200$ ), affordable/low-cost tuition ( $r = .200$ ), one-on-one meeting with a college representative or counselor/adviser ( $r = .127$ ), duration to complete the academic program ( $r = .176$ ), admissions standards ( $r = .171$ ), student support services ( $r = .180$ ), earning potential of the academic program ( $r = .170$ ), transferrable credits or pathways ( $r = .186$ ), small class sizes ( $r = .140$ ), and Facebook ( $r = .111$ ). Conversely, a negative correlation was identified at the 0.01 significance level between overall satisfaction and the gender of male participants ( $r = -.146$ ), suggesting that being male is negatively associated with overall satisfaction to enroll in a community college.

Furthermore, at the 0.05 significance level, positive correlations were found between overall satisfaction and several other factors. These correlations included flexible course offerings ( $r = .233$ ); delivery of academic programs ( $r = .228$ ); affordable/low-cost tuition ( $r =$



.200); availability of financial aid and scholarships ( $r = .200$ ); convenient and accessible campus location ( $r = .169$ ); faculty qualification or expertise ( $r = .193$ ); interaction with college staff ( $r = .192$ ); attractiveness of the college campus ( $r = .158$ ); gender of females ( $r = .153$ ); college website ( $r = .112$ ); recruiting initiatives ( $r = .113$ ); word-of-mouth recommendation from family, friends, etc. ( $r = .102$ ); campus amenities ( $r = .125$ ); email ( $r = .152$ ); text messages ( $r = .136$ ); read outdoor advertisements ( $r = .126$ ); modern classroom/computer technology ( $r = .141$ ); promotional marketing materials ( $r = .086$ ); media outreach efforts and marketing communication efforts ( $r = .071$ ); and Pinterest ( $r = .070$ ; see Table 14).

**Table 14***Significant Correlations Between Overall Satisfaction With The Decision to Enroll*

Overall satisfaction with decision to enroll	Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed)
Flexible course offerings (e.g., variety of days, times, evening, weekend, or online)	.233**
Delivery of academic programs	.228**
Availability of financial aid and scholarships	.200**
Affordable/low-cost tuition	.200**
Faculty qualification or expertise	.193**
Interaction with college staff	.192**
Transferrable credits or pathways	.186**
Student support services (e.g., tutors, success coaches, accommodations)	.180**
Flexibility of payment options	.177**
Duration to complete your academic program	.176**
Admissions standards	.171**
Earning potential of your academic program	.170**
Convenient and accessible campus location	.169**
Attractiveness of the college campus	.158**
Gender Female	.153**
Email	.152**
Career services/job placement services	.148**
College website	.147**
Gender male	-.146**
Modern classroom/computer technology	.141**
Small class sizes	.140**
Text messages	.136**
One-on-one meeting with a college representative or counselor/adviser (e.g., virtual, or in-person appointment)	.127**
Read outdoor advertisements (e.g., billboards, bus ads)	.126**
Campus amenities (e.g., fitness center, childcare center, study spaces)	.125**
Diversity of campus culture	.119**
Recruiting initiatives played a significant role in the decision to enroll. Includes: College tours, visits, open house, admission, and counselor virtual and in-person appointments.	.113**
College website	.112**
Facebook	.111**
Word-of-mouth recommendation from family, friends, etc.	.102**
Radio or music app platform	.093**
Campus clubs and student organizations	.090**
Online advertisements	.087**
Email	.087**

Overall satisfaction with decision to enroll	Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed)
Promotional marketing materials played a significant role in the decision to enroll. Includes: College brochures, magazines, newspapers, direct mail, and website.	.086**
Word-of-mouth recommendation from family, friends, etc.	.085**
Read brochures or direct mail	.082**
One-on-one meeting with a college representative or counselor/adviser (e.g., virtual, or in-person appointment)	.079**
Media outreach efforts played a significant role in the decision to enroll. Includes: social media, television, outdoor advertisements, and radio/music application.	.071*
Marketing communication efforts played a significant role in the decision to enroll. Includes: email, live chat, text, video messages, and phone calls.	.071*
Pinterest	.070*
In-person open house or campus visit	.066*
Streaming service provider (e.g., Netflix, Amazon Prime, Hulu, Apple TV)	.064*

*Note.*  $N = 1150$ ; \*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed); \* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

***Research Question 5: What Influence, if Any, Do Promotional Marketing Strategies, Value Factors, and Ways of Gathering Information About Community Colleges Have on Adult Learners' Satisfaction With Their Decision to Enroll in a Community College?***

I conducted a multiple regression analysis using the stepwise regression method in SPSS Version 28 as the statistical tool to determine the relationship between the independent (i.e., predictor) variables and the dependent (i.e., response) variable of overall satisfaction with the respondents' decisions to enroll in community college. I reviewed those variables that emerged as significantly correlated in the Pearson correlations and inputted each variable into a stepwise regression to categorize the predictor variables into logical blocks for analysis. Stepwise regression can be useful when researchers look to control different blocks of variables according

to their assumed order of occurrence, and determines the significance, if any, in relation to the dependent variable or outcome variable (e.g., overall satisfaction with the decision to enroll in a community college; Astin, 1993; Creswell, 2014). Using the stepwise regression blocking method, I input the 43 predictor variables based on the following six blocks: (a) demographic characteristics, (b) use of marketing methods, (c) promotional marketing methods used to obtain information on community colleges, (d) promotional marketing strategies that influence decisions to enroll, (d) value factors that influence decisions to enroll, and (e) ways of gathering information that played a significant role in decisions to enroll in a community college.

Block 1 contained significant female and male demographic variables that also served to control for them. Block 2 contained specific marketing elements that emerged as significant that included Facebook, Pinterest, email, online advertisements, text messages, radio or music applications, streaming services, outdoor advertisements, and brochures or direct mail. Block 3 included significant variables that adult learners use to obtain information about their community college such as email, college website, word-of-mouth recommendations, and one-on-one meetings with college representatives. Block 4 represented the promotional marketing strategies that influenced decisions to enroll such as college website, in-person open house or campus visit, word-of-mouth recommendations, and one-on-one meetings with college representatives. Block 5 consisted of all 20 value factor preferences that emerged with significance in the Pearson correlations, ranging from diversity of campus culture to small class sizes. Lastly, Block 6 contained all four variables (i.e., promotional marketing materials, recruitment initiatives, media outreach efforts, and marketing communication efforts) that had significance in ways adult learners gather information that played a considerable role in their decision to enroll in a community college (see Table 15).

**Table 15***Regression Block Analysis*

Predictor variable	Block
Gender female	Demographic - 1
Gender male	Demographic - 1
Facebook	Use - 2
Pinterest	Use - 2
Email	Use - 2
Online advertisements	Use - 2
Text messages	Use - 2
Radio or music app platform	Use - 2
Streaming service provider (e.g., Netflix, Amazon Prime, Hulu, Apple TV)	Use - 2
Read outdoor advertisements (e.g., billboards, bus ads)	Use - 2
Read brochures or direct mail	Use - 2
Email	Obtain Information - 3
College website	Obtain Information - 3
Word-of-mouth recommendation from family, friends, etc.	Obtain Information - 3
One-on-one meeting with a college representative or counselor/adviser (e.g., virtual, or in-person appointment)	Obtain Information - 3
College website	Promotional Marketing Influence - 4
In-person open house or campus visit	Promotional Marketing Influence - 4
Word-of-mouth recommendation from family, friends, etc.	Promotional Marketing Influence - 4
One-on-one meeting with a college representative or counselor/adviser (e.g., virtual, or in-person appointment)	Promotional Marketing Influence - 4
Diversity of campus culture	Value Factor Influence - 5
Faculty qualification or expertise	Value Factor Influence - 5
Interaction with college staff	Value Factor Influence - 5
Campus amenities (e.g., fitness center, childcare center, study spaces)	Value Factor Influence - 5
Modern classroom/computer technology	Value Factor Influence - 5
Attractiveness of the college campus	Value Factor Influence - 5
Convenient and accessible campus location	Value Factor Influence - 5
Delivery of academic programs	Value Factor Influence - 5
Predictor variable	Block
Availability of financial aid and scholarships	Value Factor Influence - 5
Flexibility of payment options	Value Factor Influence - 5
Affordable/low-cost tuition	Value Factor Influence - 5
Admissions standards	Value Factor Influence - 5

Student support services (e.g., tutors, success coaches, accommodations)	Value Factor Influence - 5
Career services/job placement services	Value Factor Influence - 5
Campus clubs and student organizations	Value Factor Influence - 5
Earning potential of your academic program	Value Factor Influence - 5
Duration to complete your academic program	Value Factor Influence - 5
Transferrable credits or pathways	Value Factor Influence - 5
Small class sizes	Value Factor Influence - 5
Promotional marketing materials played a significant role in the decision to enroll. Includes: College brochures, magazines, newspapers, direct mail, and website.	Ways of Gathering Information Significance - 6
Recruiting initiatives played a significant role in the decision to enroll. Includes: College tours, visits, open house, admission, and counselor virtual and in-person appointments.	Ways of Gathering Information Significance - 6
Media outreach efforts played a significant role in the decision to enroll. Includes: social media, television, outdoor advertisements, and radio/music application.	Ways of Gathering Information Significance - 6
Marketing communication efforts played a significant role in the decision to enroll. Includes: email, live chat, text, video messages, and phone calls.	Ways of Gathering Information Significance - 6

I entered 43 potential predictor variables into the initial regression model, which resulted in eight models, or potential predictor variables in the first run of the analysis. The regression model was run a second time to ensure all predictors were significant at the .05 level, resulting in the college website and word-of-mouth recommendations being eliminated from the third block. Therefore, a total of 37 predictor variables (see Table 17) were eliminated from the stepwise regression analysis.

**Table 16**

*Eliminated Predictors from Stepwise Regression Block Analysis*

Response Variable: Overall satisfaction with decision to enroll	
Predictor Variable	Block
Gender Male	Demographic - 1
Facebook	Utilization - 2

Pinterest	Utilization - 2
Online Advertisements	Utilization - 2
Text Messages	Utilization - 2
Radio or Music App Platform	Utilization - 2
Streaming Service Provider (e.g., Netflix; Amazon Prime; Hulu; Apple TV)	Utilization - 2
Read brochures or direct mail	Utilization - 2
Email	Obtain Information - 3
College Website	Obtain Information - 3
Word-of-mouth Recommendation from family, friends, etc.	Obtain Information - 3
One-on-one meeting with a college representative or counselor/adviser (e.g., virtual, or in-person appointment)	Obtain Information - 3
College Website	Promotional Marketing Influence - 4
In-person open house or campus visit	Promotional Marketing Influence - 4
Word-of-mouth Recommendation from family, friends, etc.	Promotional Marketing Influence - 4
One-on-one meeting with a college representative or counselor/adviser (e.g., virtual, or in-person appointment)	Promotional Marketing Influence - 4
Diversity of Campus Culture	Value Factor Influence - 5
Interaction with college staff	Value Factor Influence - 5
Campus amenities (e.g., fitness center, childcare center, study spaces)	Value Factor Influence - 5
Modern classroom/computer technology	Value Factor Influence - 5
Attractiveness of the college campus	Value Factor Influence - 5
Convenient and accessible campus location	Value Factor Influence - 5
Predictor variable	Block
Flexibility of payment options	Value Factor Influence - 5
Affordable/low-cost tuition	Value Factor Influence - 5
Admissions standards	Value Factor Influence - 5
Student Support Services (e.g., Tutors, success coaches, accommodations)	Value Factor Influence - 5
Career Services/Job placement services	Value Factor Influence - 5
Campus clubs and student organizations	Value Factor Influence - 5
Earning potential of your academic program	Value Factor Influence - 5
Duration to complete your academic program	Value Factor Influence - 5
Transferrable credits or pathways	Value Factor Influence - 5
Small class sizes	Value Factor Influence - 5

Promotional marketing materials played a significant role in the decision to enroll. Includes: College brochures, magazines, newspapers, direct mail, and website.	Ways of Gathering Information Significance - 6
Recruiting initiatives played a significant role in the decision to enroll. Includes: College tours, visits, open house, admission, and counselor virtual and in-person appointments.	Ways of Gathering Information Significance - 6
Media outreach efforts played a significant role in the decision to enroll. Includes: social media, television, outdoor advertisements, and radio/music application.	Ways of Gathering Information Significance - 6
Marketing communication efforts played a significant role in the decision to enroll. Includes: email, live chat, text, video messages, and phone calls.	Ways of Gathering Information Significance - 6

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Once I ran the stepwise regression model a second time to provide results for all predictor variables that were significant at the .05 level (see Table 17), the result showed six models, or significant predictor variables: gender-female from the initial demographic block one; email and reading of outdoor advertisements from utilization of block two; and flexible course offerings, faculty qualification and expertise, and availability of financial aid and scholarships from the value factor influence of the original block five. George and Mallery (2022) explained, “The p value identifies the likelihood that a particular outcome may have occurred by chance” (p. 112). Diagnostics were run on the stepwise regression model to ensure minimal multicollinearity existed among variables. Condition indices, which are integral in understanding multicollinearity, consistently ranged from 1.000 through 19.264 in this model. A condition index measures how much the variance of the regression coefficients is inflated due to multicollinearity. Lower values, especially below 30, indicate minimal multicollinearity concerns (Statistics How To, 2023).



**Table 17***Significant Predictors of Overall Satisfaction With the Decision to Enroll in a Community**College*

Predictor variable	Block	Model	R	R <sup>2</sup>	Step $\beta$	Final Step $\beta$	<i>F</i>	Sig
Gender female	Demographic -1	1	0.153	0.023	0.101	0.103	27.433	< .001**
Email	Use	2	0.203	0.041	0.074	0.075	24.746	0.011*
Read outdoor advertisements	Use - 2	3	0.223	0.05	0.057	0.058	20.065	0.048*
Flexible course offerings	Value Factor Influence – 5	4	0.285	0.081	0.116	0.118	25.219	< .001**
Faculty qualification or expertise	Value Factor Influence - 5	5	0.306	0.093	0.096	0.104	23.583	< .001**
Availability of financial aid and scholarships	Value Factor Influence - 5	6	0.314	0.099	0.081	0.083	20.856	0.01*

*Note.*  $N = 1150$ ;  $R^2 = .099$ ; Adjusted  $R^2 = .094$ ;  $p = <.05^*$ ;  $p = <.001^{**}$ .

The final regression yielded six significant predictors of overall satisfaction with the decision to enroll at a community college. The findings from the regression analysis are presented in Table 17. The first column lists the predictor variable, the second column lists the Block description, and the model number is listed in the third column. The fourth column explains the two-tailed Pearson  $r$  correlation between each predictor variable and the dependent variable. Column 5 provides the  $R$  squared. George and Mallery (2022) explained:

$R$  squared yields a value that represents the proportion of variation in the dependent variable that is explained by the independent variables.  $R^2$  is the most commonly used

measure of the overall effect size of the independent or predictor variables on the dependent variable. (p. 226)

Column 6 shows the Step  $\beta$ , or standardized beta coefficient, as it was first entered into the regression model. The Final Step  $\beta$ , which is the final beta weight for each independent variable in the final regression model, is listed in Column 7.

The analysis resulted in Model 1 having gender—specifically female participants—to have a statistically significant positive relationship with overall satisfaction with the decision to enroll in a community college ( $r = 0.153, p < .001$ ). When considered in isolation, being female explained approximately 2.3% of the variance in overall satisfaction. The beta coefficient for gender in the last step, accounting for all other predictors, was 0.103 ( $p < .001$ ). As the regression progressed, each additional predictor variable was entered into the model. Email in Model 2 was added as a predictor and showed a statistically significant positive relationship with overall satisfaction ( $r = 0.203, p = 0.011$ ). This addition resulted in a 4% increase in the variance explained. The beta coefficient for email in the last step was 0.075. Model 3 included read outdoor advertisements (e.g., billboards, bus ads) that demonstrated a statistically significant positive relationship with overall satisfaction in the decision to enroll in a community college ( $r = 0.223, p = 0.048$ ). This addition contributed to a 5% increase in the variance explained, and the beta coefficient for this predictor was 0.058. Flexible course offerings followed in Model 4, which exhibited a statistically significant positive relationship with overall satisfaction ( $r = 0.285, p < .001$ ). Its inclusion led to a substantial 8.1% increase in the variance explained. The beta coefficient for flexible course offerings in the last step was 0.118. Faculty qualification or expertise entered in Model 5 and displayed a statistically significant positive relationship with overall satisfaction ( $r = 0.306, p < .001$ ), explaining an additional 1.2% of the variance. The beta

coefficient for this predictor in the last step was 0.104. Finally, availability of financial aid and scholarships entered in Model 6 and demonstrated a statistically significant positive relationship with overall satisfaction with the decision to enroll in a community college ( $r = 0.314, p = 0.01$ ), contributing to a 0.9% increase in the variance explained. The beta coefficient for this predictor in the last step was 0.083. The regression model, considering all predictors, explained approximately 9.9% of the variance in overall satisfaction ( $R^2 = 0.099$ ). The adjusted R-squared of 0.094 accounted for the number of predictors and provided a more conservative estimate of the variance explained. The overall model was statistically significant ( $p < .001$ ). Notably, flexible course offerings, faculty qualification or expertise, and availability of financial aid and scholarships appeared to be particularly influential factors positively associated with higher overall satisfaction with the decision to enroll in a community college. Females, email use, and reading outdoor advertisements also played significant roles, though to a lesser extent.

**Variance by Block.** I examined the data using a stepwise regression model, incorporating different blocks of predictor variables (see Table 18). The cumulative R-squared values indicated the proportion of variance in the dependent variable (i.e., overall satisfaction with the decision to enroll) accounted for by the predictors in each block. The first block included the demographic variable of female gender, which accounted for 2.3% of the variance in overall satisfaction ( $R^2 = 0.023$ ),  $F(1, 1148) = 27.433, p < .001$ . This statistically significant  $F$  change value implied that adding gender as a predictor significantly improved the model's ability to explain overall satisfaction.

Expanding the model in the second block to include email and read outdoor advertisements increased the variance to 5% ( $R^2 = 0.009$ ),  $F(2, 1147) = 21.569, p < .001$ . This

indicated these additional variables significantly contributed to explaining the variance in overall satisfaction to enroll at a community college, as evidenced by the significant  $F$  change value.

Moving to the third block, which further incorporated flexible course offerings, faculty qualification or expertise, and availability of financial aid and scholarships, the variance explained increased to 9.9% ( $R^2 = 0.005$ ),  $F(3, 1146) = 10.301$ ,  $p < .001$ . Each block of predictors significantly improved the model's ability to explain the variance in overall satisfaction with the decision to enroll at a community college, as indicated by the significant  $F$  change values and associated  $p$  values ( $p < .001$  for all models). Therefore, the analysis suggested that not only do these predictors individually influence overall satisfaction, but their collective impact—as indicated by the cumulative  $R$  squared values and  $F$  change statistics—highlighted the complex and multifaceted nature of factors affecting students' satisfaction with their enrollment decisions in a community college (see Table 18).

**Table 18**

*Significant Predictors of Overall Satisfaction With The Decision to Enroll in a Community*

*College – Final Regression Model*

Block and description	Cumulative $R^2$
Block 1: Demographic	0.023*
Block 2: Use	0.05*
Block 3: Value Factor Influence	0.099*

*Note.*  $N = 1150$ ;  $R^2 = .099$ ; Adjusted  $R^2 = .094$ ;  $p = <.001^*$ .

### **Delimitations**

For the purposes of this quantitative research study, I delimited the study to community colleges and adult learners ages 25 or older enrolled in participating 2-year community colleges in Ohio. The study did not involve the assessment of academic programs, student services, or student success rates that are specific to any of the community colleges involved in the study.

### **Limitations**

One limitation of quantitative survey design is that the survey questionnaire does not provide an opportunity to speak directly with participants to ask follow-up questions that may further explain their answers to each question. Next, although I aimed to include pertinent promotional marketing strategies that prior research had identified, additional factors specific to institutions may not have been included in the survey responses. In addition, as characteristic for survey design, there was no opportunity for participants to answer the questions in depth to determine if there were any additional influencers of what adult learners may find preferable or valuable.

Additional limitations to the study further related to the survey design. First, the study was an ex post facto study, so the survey instrument collected responses at one time after

students had already enrolled; as a result, responses to questions were limited to activities or engagements that had already taken place. Next, the survey collected data at one point in time during the semester; therefore, adult learner responses to certain variables such as age, enrollment, and employment demographics could have changed over the course of semester. Furthermore, an additional limitation included the final dataset having a bias that resulted in approximately 60% of the respondents being female and 40% being male, along with a disproportional response of respondents from rural colleges compared to urban community colleges.

Adult learners enrolled at the surveyed Ohio community colleges completed a voluntary, online questionnaire. Accessibility of computer or online devices, along with the comprehension of using an online survey tool, could have posed an additional limitation to the study for those who were unfamiliar. A final limitation to the study related to the generalizability of findings to all community colleges in the country. As the study's sample of adult learners came from the state of Ohio, conclusions regarding other states and their institutions must be done cautiously.

### **Assumptions**

There were several assumptions inherent in the design of this study. First, an assumption in this research was that those who responded to the survey engaged in at least one promotional marketing strategy prior to enrolling at the community college. Second, I assumed that those who choose not to respond would have the same responses to survey questions as those who did respond. Third, it was an assumption to this research that all participants read and comprehended the survey and questions, and the respondents answered the survey questionnaire honestly.

## **Summary**

This chapter discussed the analysis of research findings from a 15-question, online survey questionnaire from 1,150 respondents who consisted of enrolled adult learners ages 25 or older, and the statistical tools used to evaluate the data. The presentation of the data was aligned with the study's research questions. Chapter 5 provides discussions surrounding the findings, implications for future research, and recommendations.

## **Chapter Five**

### **Discussion and Recommendations**

The growing competition among colleges and universities for students has emphasized the need to incorporate marketing strategies into campus-wide enrollment plans (Filip, 2012; Kotler & Fox, 1995). Institutions have increasingly devoted more financial resources into marketing tactics that emphasize brand identity, competitive advantage, and positioning strategies (Dollinger et al., 2018; Edmiston-Strasser, 2009; Fiaz et al., 2019; Harrison-Walker, 2009; Judson et al., 2008; Kotler & Fox, 1995; Sung & Yang, 2008). Scholars have demonstrated that successful marketing strategies identify customers, and aim to understand their needs, preferences, and the factors that influence their decision to engage with products or services; that knowledge of internal and external environments provides opportunities for higher education institutions to include market segmentation along specific criteria such as gender, age, race/ethnicity, geography, or income levels to target market selections (CIM, 2015; Ho & Hung, 2008; Kotler & Fox, 1995; Quatroche, 2004). Community colleges can serve an integral role in contributing to increased postsecondary attainment levels of adult learners nationwide, but the knowledge of effective marketing strategies geared toward segmentation of this target market population and what they find most valuable is limited in scholarship and sparse for these institutions. This study aimed to identify promotional marketing strategies and other value factors that appeal to diverse adult learner groups enrolled in community colleges, and to analyze the influence of these marketing strategies on the adult learners' satisfaction with their decision to enroll in a community college. This chapter offers an overview of the study, discussion of the key findings, implications for practice, implications for theory, and recommendations for future research related to attracting more adult learners deciding to enroll in community colleges.



## Overview of the Study

The study followed a quantitative survey research design to address its research questions, which aimed to determine the differences between demographic adult learner groups in relation to their satisfaction with their decision to enroll in a community college, to analyze the relationship between promotional marketing strategies, value factors, ways of gathering information, and to explore the creation of a regression model to discover what factors, if any, influence adult learners' satisfaction with their decision to enroll in a community college. The 7P marketing mix served as the theoretical framework guiding the study. The 7P marketing mix is based on price, promotion, people, product, place, process, and physical evidence. When combined, each component of the 7P marketing mix makes up a comprehensive marketing strategy (CIM, 2015). Kotler and Fox (1995) argued that marketing was not just the advertising and promotion of goods and services, but rather, it required a comprehension of all factors that may influence the constituents' decisions.

To collect information, I administered a 15-question online survey questionnaire developed in Qualtrics and distributed to adult student populations ages 25 and older enrolled at seven Ohio accredited public community colleges. The survey questionnaire reached a total of 13,375 students who were enrolled for the spring semester of 2022-2023 academic year either part- or full-time, in any mode of course delivery, and had not yet earned a degree or certificate from their respective institutions. The survey was implemented at a time when community colleges were experiencing continuous declines in enrollment after the unprecedented economic shock delivered by the COVID-19 pandemic (Wissman, 2021; Knox, 2022; Brock & Slater, 2021; Hanover, 2022a). All 15 questions on the survey questionnaire followed a forced-completion format, which required a response before participants could move on to the next question. In

addition, participants could choose to withdraw at any time during the survey. The final dataset ended up with an 8.5% completion rate with a total of 1,150 fully completed surveys (N = 1150).

In this study, participant demographics were analyzed using a range of descriptive statistics to gain a comprehensive understanding of the study's sample. Of the total 1,150 participants, 74.60% identified as female, 23.60% as male, while 0.90% chose "other," and another 0.90% preferred not to disclose their gender. Age distribution revealed that the majority fell within the 25-29 age bracket (28.90%), followed closely by those aged 30-34 (22.30%), with the lowest representation from the 45-49 age group (8.30%). In terms of enrollment status, 65.50% of participants were part-time students (enrolled in fewer than 12 credit hours), while 34.50% were full-time students (enrolled in 12 or more credit hours). Employment status varied, with 22.60% of participants being unemployed, 45.40% working full-time (40 hours or more per week), and 32.00% working part-time (less than 40 hours per week). Ethnicity data highlighted the diversity of the sample, with 72.5% identifying as White/Caucasian (not Hispanic), 19.6% as Black or African American (not Hispanic), 4.5% as Hispanic/Latinx/Spanish origin, 2.3% as Asian/Pacific Islander, and 0.9% as American Indian/Alaskan Native. A smaller percentage, 0.1%, identified as Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander. Additionally, 3.5% of participants preferred not to respond to the race/ethnicity question.

A variety of statistical analysis was conducted in Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 28, to address the study's five research questions. I used descriptive statistics such as measuring the mean, standard deviation, and variance to provide insights into the central tendency, and distribution of variables to analyze findings associated with the first two research questions. To determine whether there were statistically significant differences between groups regarding the overall satisfaction with the decision to enroll for research question three, I utilized

the analysis of variance (ANOVA) statistical test. Pearson correlations helped ascertain significant relationships between multiple variables measured on an interval or ratio basis (Creswell, 2014). Pearson correlation statistical analysis thus helped address research question four with respect to significant relationships between adult learners' overall satisfaction with decision to enroll in a community college and 96 other variables. Finally, to address research question five, I conducted a multiple regression analysis, using the stepwise regression, which allowed me to ascertain the set of independent predictor variables that had significant influence on the dependent, or response variable of overall satisfaction with the respondents' decision to enroll in a community college.

### **Discussion of Key Findings**

In this section, I discuss the key findings that aligned with the study's research questions in detail. Three key findings emerged as important:

- Key Finding 1: The importance of electronic methods of communication, interpersonal experiences, and college attributes for adult learners' decision to enroll in community colleges.
- Key Finding 2: A combination of six predictors influencing adult learners' enrollment in community colleges.
- Key Finding 3: Significant gender-based differences emerged with adult learners' overall satisfaction with their decision to enroll in community colleges.

***Key Finding 1: The Importance of Electronic Methods of Communication, Interpersonal Experiences, and College Attributes for Adult Learners' Decision to Enroll in Community Colleges.***

This study identified several appealing methods of electronic communication that are most utilized by adult learners such as email and text messages, followed by streaming services, and Internet surfing. Conversely, platforms such as Twitter and LinkedIn had significantly lower appeal rates among adult learners. Advancements in technology have revolutionized marketing strategies, allowing companies, including higher education institutions, to adapt the ways in which they reach customers, or prospective students based on what marketing methods consumers choose to engage with most (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2000, 2003). As this study's evaluation of appeal demonstrates, the top five marketing strategies from the 19 examined that adult learners used or engaged in on an ongoing basis were email ( $M = 5.23$ ;  $SD = 1.00$ ), followed by text messages ( $M = 5.15$ ;  $SD = 1.14$ ), streaming service provider (e.g. Netflix, Amazon Prime, Hulu, Apple TV) ( $M = 4.51$ ;  $SD = 1.45$ ), surf the Internet ( $M = 4.49$ ;  $SD = 1.36$ ), and radio or music app platforms ( $M = 4.39$ ;  $SD = 1.47$ ). Adult learners were least engaged in Twitter ( $M = 1.61$ ;  $SD = 1.11$ ), LinkedIn ( $M = 1.96$ ;  $SD = 1.19$ ), Online Advertisements ( $M = 2.16$ ;  $SD = 1.15$ ), Pinterest ( $M = 2.31$ ;  $SD = 1.38$ ), and Snapchat ( $M = 2.32$ ;  $SD = 1.57$ ).

Digital and mobile technology has revolutionized marketing by providing targeted ways to reach segmented audiences. Scholars have demonstrated that by evaluating what communication methods or marketing strategies prospective consumers or students engage in, provides an opportunity to segment and reach targeted audiences such as adult learners (del Rocío Bonilla et al., 2020; Dollinger et al., 2018; Fiaz et al., 2019; AMA, 2020; CIM, 2015).

Ruffalo Noel Levitz (RNL), a leader in educational enrollment, student success, and fundraising research, highlighted the importance of targeted email, text messaging, and digital advertisements toward adult learners in their *2019 Adult Undergraduate Marketing and Recruitment Practices Report for Four-Year Institutions*, but failed in the evaluation of similar marketing and recruitment methods specifically utilized toward adult learners in their the *2020 Marketing and Recruitment Practices: Two-Year Institutions* report (RNL, 2019; RNL, 2021). The key finding of utilizing email, text messages, and digital advertisements on the Internet to target adult learners in community colleges as important communication methods contribute to existing research and expand upon higher education scholarship. An interesting outcome of this study also emerged in the identification streaming service providers such as Netflix, Amazon Prime, or Hulu for example, as an important strategy to reach prospective adult learner populations. The inclusion of television advertisements to measure effective marketing and recruitment practices may not be specific enough with current adult populations as conducted in previous research and reported as best practices (RNL, 2019; RNL, 2021). The revolutionized digital landscape that now incorporates streaming service providers expands on existing research to provide higher education marketing professionals an opportunity to target adult learners in further segmented ways utilizing digital technologies and a variety of platforms.

Additionally, examining the ways in which adult learners obtained information about community colleges shed light on crucial avenues and information locations. Notably, in this study, the college website played a pivotal role, followed by email and word-of-mouth recommendations. In contrast, live chats and off-campus recruitment activities had low engagement rates. More specifically, to obtain information about the community college in which they enrolled, the adult learners in this study mostly consulted the college website (M =

4.14; SD = 1.44), followed by email (M = 3.52; SD = 1.63), word-of-mouth recommendation from family, friends, etc. (M = 3.12; SD = 1.54), one-on-one meeting with a college representative or counselor/adviser (e.g., virtual, or in-person appointment) (M = 3.12; SD = 1.54), social media (M = 2.56; SD = 1.43), and in-person open house or campus visit (M = 2.46; SD = 1.45). The college website and email as important communication methods to adult learners contribute to existing literature. Mentz and Whiteside (2003) discussed the importance of websites for colleges and universities. Effective use of college or university websites can play a significant role in attracting prospective students and should include a clear-cut admission process laid out for students, highlights of the institution's benefits, value, success stories, and cost and financial support opportunities that are easily accessible for students (Mentz & Whiteside, 2003). Interestingly, I found that all the interpersonal experiences such as word-of-mouth, one-on-one meetings with college representatives, and in-person open house or campus visits were used quite often and prove to be important for adult learners enrolling in community colleges. Culliver (2015) found comparable results in research conducted to examine the relationship between university advertising and marketing techniques that included electronic, traditional, and word-of-mouth marketing methods and the characteristics and motivations of nontraditional students that decided to enroll into a bachelor's degree program. Tucciarone (2008) conducted a qualitative study to examine the affects advertising has on students' search and community college choice, using formerly enrolled students at a community college. Findings also indicated that external influences of parents, friends, and counselors can serve as persuasive methods of communication in reinforcing word-of-mouth messaging and can impact enrollment decisions. More specifically, results of this study expand upon existing research surrounding non-traditional students and community college populations indicating interpersonal

experiences such as word-of-mouth, one-on-one meetings, and in-person campus events emerged just as important to adult learners enrolling in community colleges and significantly influenced the enrollment decisions of many adults in this study.

Analyzing the preferred marketing mix components, several trends emerged. Interaction with college staff and faculty expertise ranked highest in the People marketing component mix, while affordable tuition and financial aid availability were pivotal in the Price component mix. Flexibility in course offerings and delivery methods was crucial in the Place marketing component mix, emphasizing the importance of adapting to adult learners' schedules. Additionally, modern classroom technology and program transferability significantly influenced adult learners, suggesting a demand for progressive and transfer-friendly educational experiences. This study contributes to existing literature in stressing the marketing mix components are vital in shaping students' perceptions, satisfaction, and overall enrollment experiences and can be utilized to understand the importance of campus attributes that influenced students' decisions (Ivy, 2008; Landrum, 2018; Mahajan & Golahit, 2019). Higher education institutions, including community colleges, utilize the 7P marketing mix (product, price, place, promotion, process, people, and physical evidence) to influence students' decisions (Ivy, 2008; Landrum, 2018; Mahajan & Golahit, 2019). Landrum (2018) examined a variety of marketing factors, using a 7P marketing mix to review campus attributes such as program quality, accessibility, and reputation, and how they impact adult learners' enrollment decisions pursuing a bachelor's degree. Landrum (2018) discovered that the quality and accessibility of programs, as well as national rankings of the institution, were influential factors for nontraditional students considering higher education. However, the examination of the importance of community college attributes for adult learners' decision to enroll in community colleges is scarce. This

study expands higher education scholarship to contribute to both campus attributes, or value factors as examine in this research for adult learners, and research based on community colleges. The value factors of interaction with college staff, faculty expertise, affordable tuition and financial aid availability, flexibility in course offerings and delivery methods, modern classroom technology and program transferability significantly influenced adult learners. Moreover, the most surprising finding is the value factor of faculty expertise, which matters to adult learners and can influence their decision to enroll in a community college. The topic of faculty expertise is not prevalent in current higher education literature surrounding the subjects of adult learners or community colleges. Early research by Absher and Crawford (1996) aimed to determine market segments among community college students based on community college selector factors but did not specifically examine adult learners. Their study identified 29 community college selection factors such as location, academic programs, faculty quality, advice from others, reputation, promotional activities, and job placement services. Absher and Crawford (1996) concluded that adopting a target market approach based on segmenting students into five distinct groups: practical-minded, advice-seekers, campus magnets, good timers, and warm friendlies would attract more students to community colleges. This study's results add to higher education research to underscore faculty expertise is just as important to adult learners' decision to enroll in community colleges.

***Key Finding 2: A Combination of Six Predictors Influencing Adult Learners' Enrollment in Community Colleges***

A combination of six significant predictors influencing adult learners' enrollment in community colleges emerged in this study: being female, using email, reading outdoor advertisements, flexible course offerings, faculty qualification or expertise, and availability of



financial aid and scholarships. This study examined 43 potential predictor variables that were entered into a six-block stepwise regression model. Block one consisted of all demographic variables; followed by utilization of specific marketing methods in block two; marketing methods used to obtain information about the community followed in block three; the influence of the same promotional marketing methods followed in block four; block five consisted of all community college value factors, and ways of gathering information that played a significant role on the decision to enroll followed in block six. All 43 potential predictor variables aimed to shed light on the multifaceted aspects influencing adult learners' overall satisfaction with their decision to enroll in a community college. The regression model was run twice and resulted in the initial block three, four, and five being eliminated in the final model. The final regression result included a three-block model that led to a combination of six significant predictors (see Table 19). Although still significant, the lower variance in this study indicates that most adult learners' responses were close to the average (Creswell, 2014). The cumulative  $R^2$  values for each block in the final stepwise regression run underscore the intricate relationship of the variables examined. The block with the strongest influence is block three that included the introduction of value factors such as flexible course offerings elevated the explained variance to 9.9%, indicating the importance of adaptable learning schedules. Faculty expertise and availability of financial aid and scholarships further enhanced the regression model, revealing the critical role these factors play in shaping overall satisfaction with the decision to enroll in a community college for adult populations. Email utilization and reading outdoor advertisements increased the variance by 4% and 5%, respectively, emphasizing the impact of targeted communication strategies in block two, and females exhibited a statistically significant positive relationship with satisfaction, explaining 2.3% of the variance in block one.

**Table 19**

*Six Significant Predictors of Overall Satisfaction With The Decision to Enroll in a Community*

*College – Final Regression Three-Block Model*

Block and description	Cumulative R <sup>2</sup>
Block 1: Demographic	0.023*
Gender Female	
Block 2: Utilization	0.05*
Email	
Read outdoor advertisements	
Block 3: Value Factor Influence	0.099*
Flexible course offerings	
Faculty qualification or expertise	
Availability of financial aid and scholarships	

*Note: n = 1;150 R<sup>2</sup> = .099; Adjusted R<sup>2</sup> = .094; p = <.001\**

Interestingly, I was not surprised by the predictors in this study that emerged as related to overall satisfaction with the decision to enroll in a community college; however, much of the research surrounding similar findings has been demonstrated with respect to overall satisfaction of students enrolled at four-year institutions. For example, researchers have attempted to understand what motivates prospective students to enroll in higher education institutions through studying satisfaction levels for marketing purposes and value factors for diverse student segments (Kotler & Fox, 1995). There is much scholarship surrounding students' satisfaction with their university experience based on reputation, faculty competency, quality of interactions with staff and students, and how students' cocreation behavior influenced their overall satisfaction with their university experience but limited in nature regarding community colleges (Elliott & Healy, 2001; Elsharnouby, 2015). Noel-Levitz Student Satisfaction Inventory survey

included factors such as student centeredness, campus climate, and instructional effectiveness, and explain the vital role these play in student satisfaction for university students (Elliott & Healy, 2001). Additionally, Noel-Levitz reports examined the use of email and outdoor advertisements as best practices at four-year institutions (RNL, 2019). Scholars have examined collegiate institutional attributes such as academic programs, rankings, location, and accessibility, have been used as overall message signals and included in marketing models to evaluate satisfaction amongst college students, particularly university students (Culliver, 2015; Hernandez, 2017; Knowles et al., 2020; Landrum, 2018). Research has explored quality, accessibility of programs, interest of national ranking of the university and the ease of user-friendly online information were most influential in non-traditional student decision-making process (Landrum, 2018). The location of the university in relation to their work or home and flexibility of course scheduling has also been proven to be extremely valuable to the nontraditional students (Landrum, 2018). This study's combination of six significant predictors of adult learners' overall satisfaction to enroll in a community college such as being female, email utilization, outdoor advertisements, faculty expertise, flexible course offerings, and financial aid and scholarships, aligns with existing literature surrounding overall satisfaction with respect to decision-making but it expands in nature to include community colleges now also.

The two significant predictors that I found most surprising in this study emerged in the influence of reading outdoor advertisements and faculty expertise on adult learners' overall satisfaction at the community college level. Outdoor advertisements are not an area I would have thought there would be influence on adult learners. However, as digitization of outdoor advertisements are becoming more prevalent these are emerging to attract the attention of adult learners on roadways and neighborhoods. Additionally, faculty expertise has been associated

with research surrounding university students as stated earlier, but this study sheds further light on the evolving student populations community colleges are serving that underscores that adult learners' enrolling in community colleges are just as invested in ensuring their post-secondary credentials are coming from experts in their respective disciplines.

***Key Finding 3: Significant Gender-based Differences Emerged with Adult Learners' Overall Satisfaction with their Decision to Enroll in Community Colleges.***

This study aimed to explore adult learners' satisfaction regarding their decision to enroll in community colleges, investigating variances across diverse demographic factors. Employing the analysis of variance (ANOVA) statistical test, the analysis explored differences based on age, gender, race and ethnicity, employment status, and enrollment status. Interestingly, the study revealed a significant gender-based difference in overall satisfaction with their decision to enroll in a community college ( $F(5, 1146) = 9.30, p < .001$ ). Females exhibited notably higher satisfaction ( $M = 65.72, SD = .55$ ) compared to males ( $M = 65.50, SD = .81$ ).

Results contribute to existing literature that significant gender-based differences exist and can influence students' decision to enroll in community colleges. Quatroche (2004) aimed to understand the relationship between community college choice factors and promotional marketing methods, specifically focusing on the preferences of students enrolled at three community colleges in Western New York. The study involved evaluating the effectiveness of various promotional tactics in influencing students' decisions to inquire, apply, and enroll in college. The research analyzed several factors such as gender, age, race, and income levels to identify patterns in students' preferences. Results concluded females were significantly more influenced by various community college choice factors and promotional marketing strategies in their decision to attend their community than they were for male students (Quatroche, 2004). The

findings of this study expand on existing scholarship that demonstrated a clear disparity in satisfaction levels between male and female adult learner participants. Female participants exhibited a notably higher satisfaction level, indicated by a mean (M) score of 65.72 with a standard deviation (SD) of .55. In contrast, male participants reported a lower satisfaction level, represented by a mean score of 65.50 and a standard deviation of .81. This difference in mean scores was not just marginal; it was statistically significant, with a p-value of less than .001. The variation in satisfaction levels underscore the importance of targeted gender-based promotional marketing strategies and value factor messaging for community colleges.

Moreover, the current study highlighted several significant correlations. Females exhibited heightened satisfaction when community colleges employed email communication ( $r = .152$ ). One-on-one meetings with college representatives or counselors positively correlated with female satisfaction ( $r = .127$ ). The impact of a well-designed and informative college website was evident in its positive association with female satisfaction ( $r = .147$ ). Receiving information via text messages ( $r = .136$ ) positively influenced female satisfaction. Marketing efforts on radio or music app platforms ( $r = .093$ ) also showed a positive albeit weaker correlation. Notably, correlations indicated lower satisfaction among males ( $r = -.146$ ) compared to females. Live chat interactions ( $r = -.019$ ) exhibited a weak negative correlation, amongst males. Telephone calls ( $r = -.012$ ) also displayed a negligible negative correlation with male satisfaction, and Pinterest ( $r = .070$ ) showed a positive but weaker impact, suggesting a visual appeal to some male students, though not as impactful as other strategies. These nuanced correlations highlight the diverse factors influencing gender-based differences in the context of community college promotional marketing efforts.

Additionally, this study's results illuminated critical insights, providing an understanding of adult learners' perspectives. After analyzing age groups (25-29, 30-34, 35-39, 40-44, 45-49, and 50+ years), employment status (unemployment, full-time, part-time), and enrollment status (full-time vs. part-time), the study found no statistically significant differences amongst these groups in overall satisfaction levels ( $p > .05$ ). These results suggest that adult learners' satisfaction remains consistent across diverse age brackets, employment statuses, and enrollment concentrations. Furthermore, the analysis considered race and ethnicity, indicating no significant differences overall.

### **Implications for Practice**

The increasing competition among higher education institutions necessitates incorporating strategic marketing into enrollment plans. Institutions are investing more in brand identity and competitive advantage, emphasizing the need to understand students' needs and preferences. This study specifically focuses on community colleges, pivotal for adult learners, aiming to identify effective promotional marketing strategies and value factors influencing their satisfaction with their enrollment decisions. Its findings provide several implications for the practices that community colleges and their marketing and recruitment teams employ.

The study reveals that email, text messages, and streaming platforms are highly engaging for adult learners, while platforms like Twitter and LinkedIn have lower engagement rates. The finding in this study emphasizes the importance of digital communication tailored to adult learners. College websites, email, and word-of-mouth recommendations are crucial information sources. Moreover, one-on-one interactions, regularly updated websites, faculty expertise, affordability, and flexible course offerings significantly impact the satisfaction of adult learners' enrollment decisions at community colleges. The significance of interpersonal interactions in the

context of adult learners' satisfaction with their enrollment decisions in community colleges cannot be overstated. The research findings underscore the pivotal role of word-of-mouth recommendations, one-on-one meetings with college representatives, and in-person open house or campus visits in shaping the decisions of adult learners. Incorporating these interpersonal experiences into community college marketing and recruitment practices can profoundly impact engagement and enrollment of adult learners. While age, race, employment status, and enrollment status showed no significant differences in satisfaction levels, gender-based differences emerged as a crucial role. Female students exhibited higher satisfaction levels than males. Understanding and addressing gender-specific needs can enhance overall satisfaction.

Six predictors significantly influenced adult learners' satisfaction with their decision to enroll: being female, email utilization, reading outdoor advertisements, flexible course offerings, faculty qualification, and the availability of financial aid and scholarships. Institutions should prioritize these factors in their marketing strategies geared to adult learners. Flexible schedules, personalized interactions, and financial support options are particularly vital for adult learners, emphasizing the importance of these aspects in community college marketing efforts.

The findings of this study provide valuable insights for marketing and recruitment teams at community colleges aiming to attract and retain adult learners. Based on the implications drawn from this study, the following recommendations are presented for community college marketing and recruitment practice, specifically tailored toward adult learners:

1. Personalized Communication Strategies

- a. Email and text messaging utilization: Community colleges should invest in targeted email and text message communication strategies, as these emerged as significant predictors, understanding that email and texts are preferred and

effective methods of reaching adult learners. Community colleges should consider utilizing institutional marketing and recruitment support and customer relationship management (CRM) systems to create targeted messages specifically to adult learner populations.

- b. Digital advertising: As outdoor advertisements have been identified as significant predictors and are influential. Community colleges should explore digital formats of outdoor advertisements, leveraging technology to capture the attention of adult learners on roadways and in local neighborhoods. Perhaps, creating advertisements that feature adult learners, along with customized messaging of flexibility, financial aid and scholarship, and faculty expertise.

## 2. Interpersonal Experiences Geared Toward Adult Learners

- a. Strengthen word-of-mouth networks: Community colleges should foster relationships with area high school counselors, actively involve satisfied adult learners as alumni ambassadors, and engage community members by forging partnerships with local businesses to amplify positive word-of-mouth networks.
- b. One-on-one meetings: Provide personalized counseling or advising sessions for prospective adult learners. Host in-person and virtual one-on-one meetings for working adults. Offering flexible scheduling for such sessions ensures these are conducive for busy adult populations.
- c. Interactive open house and campus visitations: Organize interactive and engaging open house events in-person and virtually. Incorporate hands-on demonstrations, informative workshops, and faculty-led sessions to showcase the college's offerings while showcasing expertise.



### 3. Interactive and Engaging Platforms

- a. Enhance college website: Given the pivotal role of college websites, community colleges should focus on user-friendly designs, clear admission processes, and easily accessible information regarding benefits, flexibility in course offerings, faculty expertise, and financial aid and scholarship opportunities.
- b. Utilize streaming services: Considering the high appeal of the evolving platforms of streaming services; community colleges can explore partnerships or advertising opportunities on platforms like Netflix, Amazon Prime, or Hulu to reach a broader adult learner audience.

### 4. Gender-specific Marketing

- a. Targeted gender-based strategies: Given the significant gender-based differences in satisfaction levels, community colleges should explore gender-specific marketing messages and initiatives. Tailoring promotional content and engagement strategies to resonate with male and female adult learners individually to enhance overall satisfaction.

### 5. Incorporate Flexibility in Offerings

- a. Flexible course structures: Recognizing flexible course offerings emerged as a significant predictor of adult learners' overall satisfaction with their decision to enroll, community colleges should continue to expand programs with adaptable learning schedules, accommodating the varied timelines of adult learners. Flexible course offerings should be incorporated into promotional marketing and recruitment messaging and methods.

### 6. Highlight Faculty Expertise

- a. Faculty-centric promotional marketing: Community colleges should emphasize faculty expertise and qualifications in marketing and recruitment materials, as this resonated with adult learners and emerged as a significant predictor of overall satisfaction with their decision to enroll. Creating profiles, testimonials, and videos displaying the expertise of faculty members can instill confidence in adult learners regarding the quality of education.
7. Financial Support and Scholarships
- a. Transparent financial aid information: Clear and easily accessible information about financial aid options and scholarships should be prominently featured on college websites, as this significant predictor was vital to adult learners' overall satisfaction with their decision to enroll at a community college. Community colleges should also consider informational sessions or webinars on financial aid application processes.
8. Continuous Improvement
- a. Periodic surveys: Community colleges should conduct periodic surveys among their adult learner population to gauge satisfaction levels and preferences. This feedback can guide ongoing marketing strategies and program development efforts.
  - b. Flexibility and adaptability: Institutions should remain adaptable, recognizing that the landscape of adult education is continually evolving. Staying abreast of emerging communication platforms and technological trends is crucial to reaching adult learners effectively.

## **Implications for Theory**

The marketing mix theory has gradually evolved and dispersed throughout various disciplines significantly altering the field of marketing since first being introduced by Neil Borden in 1964, particularly in the field of higher education (Filip, 2012; Havel et al., 1996; Landrum, 2018). Although, researchers have adapted the marketing mix theory throughout literature utilizing 4P mix through 11P mix models that incorporated additional service outputs to measure service performance and recommendations (Kotler & Fox, 1995; Filip, 2012; Ivy 2008; Landrum, 2018; Mahajan & Golahit, 2019). Utilizing the 7P marketing mix as a guide, the theory provided a well-rounded mix of components that aligned accurately with all areas of analysis; therefore, several implications can be drawn, shaping both theory and practice. I found the 7P marketing mix most useful as I conducted this study. This study offers valuable insights regarding each of the marketing mix components in respect to the value factors and promotional marketing strategies that can be used and evaluated specifically of community colleges; thus, contributing to the evolution of marketing theories within the context of higher education.

The study's emphasis on affordable tuition and the availability of financial aid and scholarships as pivotal factors influencing adult learners' satisfaction indicates that community colleges must continue to prioritize financial accessibility. Affordability and financial aid align with the price component of the 7P marketing mix, emphasizing the critical role of cost-related factors in shaping enrollment decisions. The study delves deep into promotional strategies, highlighting the effectiveness of email and text messages. It also sheds light on the increasing significance of digital platforms, especially streaming services, as effective promotional avenues. Electronic and digital communication expanded understanding of promotional strategies are essential in contemporary marketing theories, suggesting that traditional advertising methods

might need to make way for digital, personalized, and targeted approaches to reach adult learners effectively.

The prominence of one-on-one interactions, both virtual and in-person, as a significant factor in enrollment decisions emphasizes the importance of human connection in marketing. Interpersonal interactions align with the people component of the 7P marketing mix. Understanding and investing in personal interactions between staff and prospective students can be a potent tool in attracting and retaining adult learners. Flexibility in course offerings and delivery methods emerged as crucial factors, and signifies the importance of the place component, not just in terms of physical location, but also in the accessibility and adaptability of educational programs. Institutions should consider offering diverse learning options, catering to the varied schedules of adult learners.

Faculty expertise emerged as a surprising yet influential factor. The importance of faculty expertise to adult learners highlights the significance of the quality of education, indicating that the educational product itself is a major factor in marketing. Institutions need to focus on the expertise and engagement levels of their faculty, underlining the quality of education provided. The study indirectly emphasizes the efficiency and user-friendliness of the information-gathering process. Electronic communication aligns with the process component, suggesting that institutions need streamlined and accessible methods for prospective students to gather information. User-friendly websites, easy-to-navigate portals, and clear admission processes are essential. Finally, modern classroom technology influenced adult learners. Classroom environments align with the physical evidence component, suggesting a demand for more progressive educational settings that may serve the needs of adult learners and contribute to their overall satisfaction in community colleges. Incorporating these implications into marketing

theories can enhance the understanding of how higher education institutions, particularly community colleges, can effectively attract and retain adult learners. Moreover, this study underscores the need for continuous adaptation and innovation within the marketing strategies of educational institutions, aligning them with the evolving preferences and behaviors of their target audience.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

The study provides valuable insights identifying promotional marketing strategies and other value factors that appeal to diverse adult learner groups enrolled in community colleges, and to analyze the influence of these marketing strategies on the adult learners' satisfaction with their decision to enroll in a community college. Higher education institutions have a vast range of public and private, along with two-year and four-year institutions. Additionally, many community colleges are striving to offer applied baccalaureate degrees that could impact enrollment of adult learners. Therefore, there are additional areas beyond this study that could be explored further to contribute to higher education research.

Future studies can embark on comparative analysis of findings of this quantitative study in comparison of adult learners enrolled at four-year higher education institutions. Comparing promotional marketing strategies, value factors, and ways of gathering information between two and four-year institutions could provide deeper insight to significant predictors of adult learners' satisfaction to enroll at a particular institution. Combining a mix of institutions could reveal variations in adult learners' preferences based on the institutional characteristics and academic offerings. Future research could conduct a longitudinal study and incorporate quantitative and qualitative methods to track satisfaction levels and success rates of adult learners over time. Although, this study's focus was on adult learners' overall satisfaction to enroll at a community

college and resulted in several key findings; future research could explore what differences, if any, attract traditional age verses adult learners to enroll at community colleges. Broadening the scope of the research to examine more student populations in community college environments would also assist in the measure of the variance to contribute to social science research.

Qualitative insights could prove to offer a deeper understanding of the long-term impact of various promotional marketing strategies and value factors on adult learners. This study observed that female respondents express higher satisfaction with their decision to enroll at the community college. Future research could examine influences of promotional marketing strategies and value factors of adult learners based solely on race and ethnicity, and gender differences. Although, this study included a limitation of female to male ratio of respondents, future research could be explored to determine what community colleges could do to attract more adult learner male students to enroll. As the digital landscape is evolving, future research could explore the impact of emerging digital marketing strategies and the influence of various streaming platforms on adult learners' satisfaction to enroll at a community college.

Additionally, qualitative research methods could be employed such as focus groups and interviews to investigate greater into adult learners' satisfaction, experiences, and perceptions of their community college choice. Lastly, future research could investigate how promotional marketing strategies and value factors relate to adult learners' retention and completion rates at community colleges; utilizing a mix methods approach to analysis to garner further understanding of this unique and growing student population. Lastly, this study collaborated with the Ohio Association of Community Colleges (OACC) to attract institutions to participate across the state of Ohio. Future researchers should consider utilizing a variety of associations and

organizations such as OACC to reach more institutions and have wider studies for conducting state-wide research, particularly, doctoral students examining community colleges in Ohio.

## **Conclusion**

This study explored the intricate landscape of marketing strategies influencing adult learners' satisfaction with their decisions to enroll in community colleges. The research illuminated significant insights into the multifaceted world of higher education marketing, particularly in the context of community colleges. By employing a robust methodology and comprehensive analysis, this study provided valuable implications for both theoretical advancements and practical applications within the field of higher education marketing. The study utilized the 7P marketing mix theoretical framework and a wide array of demographic and promotional marketing variables to understand the complex landscape of adult learner enrollment. The research questions delved into various aspects, including the role of promotional marketing strategies, value factors, ways of gathering information, and their correlation with adult learners' satisfaction with their enrollment decisions.

In summary, the study made several significant findings. Firstly, the study highlighted the pivotal role of electronic communication methods such as email and text messages, alongside word-of-mouth recommendations, in influencing adult learners. These findings underline the importance of targeted, digital marketing strategies for community colleges. Additionally, the research shed light on the significance of interpersonal experiences, emphasizing the value of one-on-one meetings and in-person events in adult learners' decision-making processes. The study also unveiled gender-based disparities in satisfaction levels, with female adult learners

exhibiting notably higher satisfaction rates than their male counterparts. This gender-specific variation emphasized the need for tailored, gender-focused marketing approaches to enhance satisfaction levels effectively.

Furthermore, the research identified a combination of six key predictors that significantly influenced adult learners' enrollment decisions in community colleges. These predictors included being female, utilizing email, engaging with outdoor advertisements, valuing faculty expertise, flexible course offerings, and the availability of financial aid and scholarships. Particularly surprising were the influences of outdoor advertisements and faculty expertise, highlighting the evolving nature of promotional marketing strategies and the importance of expert faculty in community college settings. This study not only contributes valuable insights into the intricate factors guiding adult learners' satisfaction with their enrollment decisions but also expands the existing literature by specifically focusing on community colleges. By recognizing the nuanced needs and preferences of adult learners, community colleges can tailor their promotional marketing efforts and value propositions, ensuring a more tailored and satisfactory experience for this vital demographic while also acknowledging there may be differences in attracting traditional age students versus adult learners and the need for marketing and recruitment teams to segment the populations they target for more effective promotion and outreach.

In conclusion, the findings of this study provide a robust foundation for community colleges and marketing professionals to refine their strategies. By leveraging digital communication channels, enhancing interpersonal interactions, and emphasizing crucial factors such as faculty expertise, flexible course offerings, and financial aid and scholarships, community colleges can foster an environment conducive to adult learners' academic and personal growth. The study's multi-faceted approach enhances the understanding of adult



learners' decision-making processes, paving the way for more effective and empathetic enrollment practices in community colleges.

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## Appendix

### Survey Promotional Marketing Strategies and Value Factors Influencing Adult Learners

#### Enrolled in a Community College

Q1 Welcome to the research study on Promotional Marketing Strategies and Value Factors that Influenced Adult Learners' Enrollment in a Community College (301709-UT).

**Purpose:** You are invited to participate in the research project entitled An Examination of Promotional Marketing Strategies and Value Factors that Influenced Adult Learners' Enrollment in a Community College which is being conducted at the University of Toledo under the direction of Principal Investigator, Dr. Snejana Slantcheva-Durst, and Co-investigator, Kristina Willey, and can be contacted via email at [kristina.varlamov@rockets.utoledo.edu](mailto:kristina.varlamov@rockets.utoledo.edu). The purpose of this study aims to obtain information relevant to promotional marketing and recruitment strategies and aspects regarding the community college in which you enrolled and asked to answer some questions about what factors, if any, influenced you when deciding to enroll.

**Description of Procedures:** You will be presented with information relevant to promotional marketing and recruitment strategies and aspects regarding the community college in which you are enrolled and asked to answer some questions about what factors, if any, influenced you when deciding to enroll. This research study will take place using an online survey tool and should take you no longer than 10 minutes. **Once complete, you can enter in a drawing for the chance to win 1 of 10 \$50 Amazon gift cards for your participation.**

**Potential Benefits:** Once complete, you can enter in a drawing for the chance to win 1 of 10 \$50 Amazon gift cards for your participation. The survey is completely anonymous, so once the survey is submitted, you will be asked to provide your email address using a separate link to be included in the Amazon gift card participation raffle. This information is confidential and completely voluntary, and not associated with any answers related to the survey other than completion. The only direct benefit to you if you participate in this research may be that you will learn about how online surveys are run and you may learn more about promotional marketing strategies and other factors related to targeting adult learners. The field of higher education may benefit from this research by understanding how best to reach adult learners who may want to enroll in a community college. Others may benefit by learning about the results of this research.

**Potential Risks:** This research poses no more risks than what one would encounter in daily life. There is little risk of physical or psychological discomfort and low probability of it occurring, as the research asks innocuous questions; responses are collected anonymously, and participants can withdraw at any time, so the magnitude of harm, should it occur, is not greater than one would experience in daily life. There is low risk of breach of confidentiality that could result in little harm to academic standing, reputation, employability, or legal standing, as all responses are collected anonymously, and participants can withdraw at any time.

**Confidentiality:** Your participation in this research is completely anonymous and voluntary. You have the right to withdraw at any point during the study, for any reason, and without any prejudice.

Responses will be accessed only by the Principal and Co-Investigators, protected using a secure log-in through the University of Toledo account and maintained for five years. Responses will be stored in an online survey platform, Qualtrics, and no personal identifiable information is asked of respondents.

**Voluntary Participation:** The anonymous information collected from you may be de-identified and used for future research purposes. As a reminder, your participation in this research is voluntary. All questions require a response, so if there are any questions you are uncomfortable answering, you have the right to withdraw at any point during the study, for any reason, and without any prejudice. Your refusal to participate in this study will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled and will not affect your relationship with The University of Toledo or any of your classes at your community college. In addition, you may discontinue participation at any time without any penalty or loss of benefits.

**Contact Information:** If you have any questions at any time before, during or after your participation you should contact the Principal or Co-investigator in the study to discuss this research, please e-mail [kristina.varlamos@rockets.utoledo.edu](mailto:kristina.varlamos@rockets.utoledo.edu).

If you have questions beyond those answered by the research team or your rights as a research subject or research-related injuries, the Chairperson of the SBE Institutional Review Board may be contacted through the Human Research Protection Program on the main campus at (419) 530-6167.

**CONSENT SECTION – Please read carefully.**

You are making a decision whether or not to participate in this research study. By clicking the next button, and completing the survey, indicates that you have read the information provided above, you have had all your questions answered, and you have decided to take part in this research. You may take as much time as necessary to think it over.

By participating in this research, you confirm that you are at least 18 years old.

**Q2 How old are you?**

25-29 years old (26)

30-34 years old (27)

35-39 years old (28)

40-44 years old (29)

45-49 years old (30)

50 years and older (45)

**Q3 Which of the following best describes your race or ethnicity? (Check all that may apply)**

☐

White/Caucasian (not Hispanic)

☐

Black or African American (not Hispanic)

☐

Hispanic/Latinx/Spanish origin

☐

American Indian/Alaskan Native

☐

Asian/Pacific Islander

☐

Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander

☐

Prefer Not to Respond

**Q4 What best describes the gender you identify?**

Female (1)

Male (2)

Other (3)

I prefer not to respond (4)

**Q5 Are you enrolled as a part-time or full-time student this academic term?**

Part-time (Enrolled in less than 12 credit hours) (1)

Full-time (Enrolled in 12 or more credit hours) (2)

**Q6 Which best describes your current employment status?**

Part-time (I work less than 40 hours per week) (5)

Full-time (I work 40 hours or more per week) (4)

Unemployed (3)

**Q7 Approximately how many total credit hours have you completed up to this academic term?**

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**Q8 What is the primary reason for enrolling at your college?**

To earn a certificate or industry credential from this college. (2)

To earn an associate degree from this college. (8)

To earn an associate degree and then transfer to a four-year college/university. (4)

To enroll in courses to prepare to transfer to a four-year college/university. (3)

To update my job skills. (5)

For personal enrichment. (6)

Other (7)

**Q9 Please rate how often you use the following:**



	Never (1)	Rarely (7)	Sometimes (2)	Often (3)	Very Often (4)	Always (5)
Facebook (28)						
Instagram (29)						
Twitter (30)						
YouTube (31)						
TikTok (32)						
LinkedIn (33)						
Snapchat (34)						
Pinterest (35)						
Email (36)						
Online Advertisements (37)						
Online Videos (38)						
Text Messages (39)						
Surf the Internet (40)						
Radio or Music App Platform (46)						

Basic Cable  
Service  
Provider (e.g.,  
WOW; COX;  
Spectrum;  
Direct TV)  
(41)

Streaming  
Service  
Provider (e.g.,  
Netflix;  
Amazon  
Prime; Hulu;  
Apple TV) (42)

Read outdoor  
advertisements  
(e.g.,  
billboards, bus  
ads) (43)

Read brochures  
or direct mail  
(44)

Read  
newspaper or  
magazines  
(hard copy or  
online) (45)

**Q10 Please rate how often you saw, heard, or used the following to obtain information  
about the community college you are enrolled:**

	Never (1)	Rarely (7)	Sometimes (2)	Often (3)	Very Often (4)	Always (5)
Social Media (28)						
Email (29)						
Television (30)						
Live Chat (31)						
College Website (32)						
Telephone Call (33)						
Text Message (34)						
Radio App Platform (44)						
Outdoor Billboards or Bus Advertisements (35)						
Brochures or direct mail (36)						
Newspaper (hard copy or online) (37)						
In-person open house or campus visit (38)						
Virtual open house or campus visit (39)						

Off-campus  
recruitment  
activity (e.g.,  
College Fair;  
Career Fair) (40)

Music App  
Platform (45)

Word-of-mouth  
Recommendation  
from family,  
friends, etc. (41)

One-on-one  
meeting with a  
college  
representative or  
counselor/adviser  
(e.g., virtual, or  
in-person  
appointment)  
(42)

**Q11 Please rate how much the following influenced your decision to enroll at your  
community college:**

	Not at All Influential (1)	Not Very Influential (7)	Somewhat Influential (2)	Influential (3)	Very Influential (4)	Extremely Influential (5)
Social Media (28)						
Email (29)						
Television (30)						
Live Chat (31)						
Radio or Music App Platform (46)						
College Website (32)						
Telephone Call (33)						
Text Message (34)						
Outdoor Billboards or Bus Advertisements (35)						
Brochures or direct mail (36)						
Newspaper (hard copy or online) (37)						
In-person open house or campus visit (38)						
Virtual open house or campus visit (39)						

Off-campus  
recruitment  
activity (e.g.,  
College Fair;  
Career Fair) (40)

Word-of-mouth  
Recommendation  
from family,  
friends, etc. (41)

One-on-one  
meeting with a  
college  
representative or  
counselor/adviser  
(e.g., virtual, or  
in-person  
appointment)  
(42)

**Q12 Please rate the degree to which the following factors influenced your decision to enroll  
at your community college:**

	Not at All Influentia 1 (1)	Not Very Influentia 1 (7)	Somewha t Influentia 1 (2)	Influentia 1 (3)	Very Influentia 1 (4)	Extremel y Influentia 1 (5)
Diversity of Campus Culture (28)						
Faculty qualification or expertise (29)						
Interaction with college staff (30)						
Campus amenities (e.g., fitness center, childcare center, study spaces) (31)						
Modern classroom/compute r technology (32)						
Attractiveness of the college campus (33)						
Convenient and accessible campus location (34)						
Delivery of academic programs (35)						
Flexible course offerings (e.g., variety of days, times, evening, weekend, or online) (36)						
Availability of financial aid and scholarships (37)						
Flexibility of payment options (38)						

Affordable/low  
cost tuition (39)

Admissions  
standards (40)

Student Support  
Services (e.g.,  
Tutors, success  
coaches,  
accommodations)  
(41)

Career  
Services/Job  
placement services  
(42)

Campus clubs and  
student  
organizations (46)

Earning potential  
of your academic  
program (47)

Duration to  
complete your  
academic program  
(48)

Transferrable  
credits or pathways  
(49)

Small class sizes  
(50)

**Q13 Please tell us if you agree or disagree with the following statements:**



	Do not Agree at All (1)	Strongly Disagree (2)	Somewhat Disagree (3)	Somewhat Agree (4)	Strongly Agree (5)
<p>The college's promotional marketing materials played a significant role in my decision to enroll at this community college. Includes: College brochures, magazines, newspapers, direct mail, and website. (20)</p> <p>The college's recruiting initiatives played a significant role in my decision to enroll at this community college. Includes: College tours, visits, open house, admission, and counselor virtual and in-person appointments. (21)</p>					

The college's media outreach efforts played a significant role in my decision to enroll at this community college.

Includes: social media, television, outdoor advertisements, and radio/music application.  
(22)

The college's marketing communication efforts played a significant role in my decision to enroll at this community college.

Includes: email, live chat, text, video messages, and phone calls.  
(23)

**Q14 Please share your overall satisfaction with your decision to enroll at your community college.**

Not at All Satisfied (62)

Very Dissatisfied (63)

Somewhat Dissatisfied (64)

Somewhat Satisfied (65)

Very Satisfied (66)

**Q15 Please indicate which community college you are currently enrolled?**

Columbus State Community College (1)

Cincinnati State Technical and Community College (8)

Lakeland Community College (2)

Lorain County Community College (3)

Marion Technical College (4)

Northwest State Community College (5)

Owens Community College (6)

Stark State College (7)