

The Comebacker's Odyssey: Neutral Navigation Matters

A High-Quality Contact Model

The Network's service model starts with effectively recruiting adults into programs. Our research has consistently shown that Comebackers' motivations for wanting to complete their degree are typically intrinsic in nature and often very personal, although as they get older, economic reasons are increasingly cited. These findings are consistent with others' research, such as Lumina Foundation's New Agenda Series. One of those reports says: "although many postsecondary programs for adults focus on workforce training, the majority reported that acquiring knowledge is a higher priority than is enhancing employability, while half are seeking baccalaureate attainment."¹

Our model also takes into account the most viable age group of adults to target. We have found that Comebackers tend to be slightly older than what higher education enrollment managers or policymakers might predict. On average, Comebackers engage with the Network programs in their early 30s, after which re-enrollment increases and peaks around age 39. We also found that graduation increases and peaks around age 46.² These findings are aligned with National Student Clearinghouse (NSC)'s 2019 findings, which reported a median age of 42 years for the some college, no degree (SCND) population.

Behind every one of these statistics are individuals with unique journeys, aspirations, and interests. To help us deepen our understanding, six Comebackers—selected because characteristics of their individual odysseys were representative of the Comebackers in our full study set—agreed to spend hours with us, candidly sharing their stories. In talking to them, we learned that it is not a coincidence that they considered returning to school sometimes decades after they first started. Many want to be a good role model for their children, especially as their children approach college age themselves. Others describe their changing marital status, often a divorce, as an impetus to return to school. Other Comebackers told us that they were considering starting or building a business of their own and saw a college education as a way of pursuing this.³

The heart of the Network's service model is sustained, high-quality contact (HQCs) with Comebackers by Navigators, outside advisors who provide institution-agnostic guidance to Comebackers, helping them review transcripts, identify the right field of study and school, complete applications, and manage past debt. And it is a model that is helping Comebackers get back on track: those who engage with Network-affiliated programs re-enroll at a rate almost four times that of the national SCND population (50 percent versus 13 percent). And they graduate at a higher rate as well (30 percent versus 25

¹ Brian Pusser, David W. Breneman, Bruce M. Gansneder, Kay J. Kohl, John S. Levin, John H. Milam, and Sarah E. Turner, *Returning to Learning: Adults' Success in College is Key to America's Future*, New Agenda Series, Lumina Foundation for Education, March 2007, 15.

² Reported by the Network's *Data That Move Us* project in 2018.

³ Sixty percent of small business owners are age 40–59. Small Business Trends (website), [STARTUP STATISTICS—The Numbers You Need to Know](#), January 22, 2021.

percent). Even more striking, [Comebackers who engage with the Network and then go on to graduate are largely Black, Latina, and multi-racial/multi-ethnic](#) (76 percent), the reverse picture of what is happening at the national level (74 percent of graduates are white). (See the [Research Overview](#) at the end of [The Comebacker's Odyssey](#) for a more detailed explanation of this analysis.)

Among the key takeaways we are celebrating is knowing the statistically significant effect that Navigators' HQCs have on enrollment rates. We can think of HQCs as an oasis that equips Comebackers with the provisions, they require to successfully navigate the next leg of their journey. In fact, a recent analysis completed for the Network by [Urban Spatial](#) found that every additional HQC a Comebacker receives from a Network-trained Navigator corresponds to a four-tenths of 1 percent (0.44 percent) increase in the probability of enrollment. There is also a positive correlation between tenure—the length of time between when Comebackers first engage with a Navigator to their “first action” (either re-enrollment or graduation)—and the return and graduation rates.⁴

The benefits of a degree are real to both the individual and society. In the U.S. today, the average person with a bachelor's degree earns \$28,000 more every year than the average person with some college, no degree. We refer to this as the bachelor's degree salary premium, and if you are white, you are two-times more likely than a Black person and 2.5 times more likely than a Latinx person to claim this premium in this country.⁵ Among the more important findings of recent research released by the Postsecondary Value Commission (completed by the Institute for Higher Education Policy and funded by The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation), analyses from program data of the 15 University of Texas system campuses show that “Black and Latinx... completers realize substantial premiums for their degree. Five years after graduation, the median Latinx completer earns \$50,421, which is 81 percent more than their Latinx peers without a degree; median earnings are \$51,068 (a 59 percent premium) for Black completers.”⁶ And according to a 2019 study by the College Board, earning a college degree is associated with upward mobility (reducing the chance of needing public assistance), healthier lifestyles (reducing health care costs), and more active participation in family and civic life.⁷

⁴ Urban Spatial's modeling was completed for the Network in January 2021 using the same study set of 8,401 Comebackers as the Network's own analysis.

⁵ Calculated from data from the U.S. Census, 2019 American Community Survey, 1-Year Estimates.

⁶ Postsecondary Value Commission, [Equitable Value: Promoting Economic Mobility and Social Justice through Postsecondary Education](#), May 2021.

⁷ Jennifer Ma, Matea Pender, and Meredith Welch, [Education Pays 2019: The Benefits of Higher Education for Individuals and Society](#), Trends in Higher Education Series, College Board, 2019.