Bridging the Enrollment Gap

Digital Strategies to Engage California's Adult Learners

April 2025

Mark Johnson
Executive Director, Department of Marketing,
Communication & Public Relations
Peralta Community College District
markjohnson@peralta.edu

Kristy Phillips, Ed.D.
Senior Director, Community College Solutions
CLARUS a Carnegie Company
kphillips@claruscorporation.com
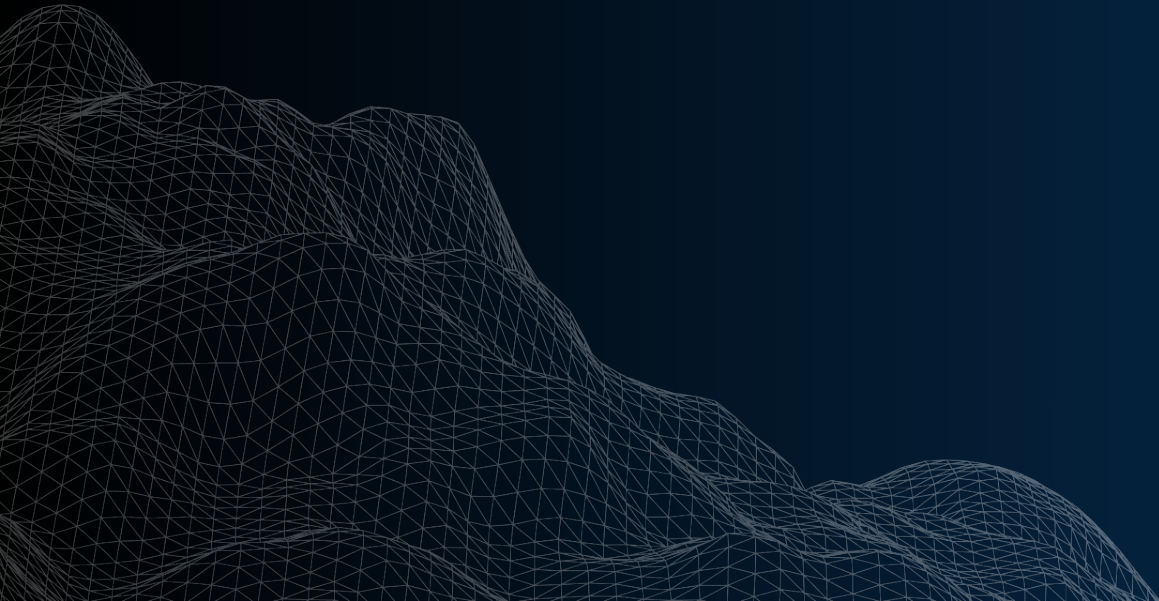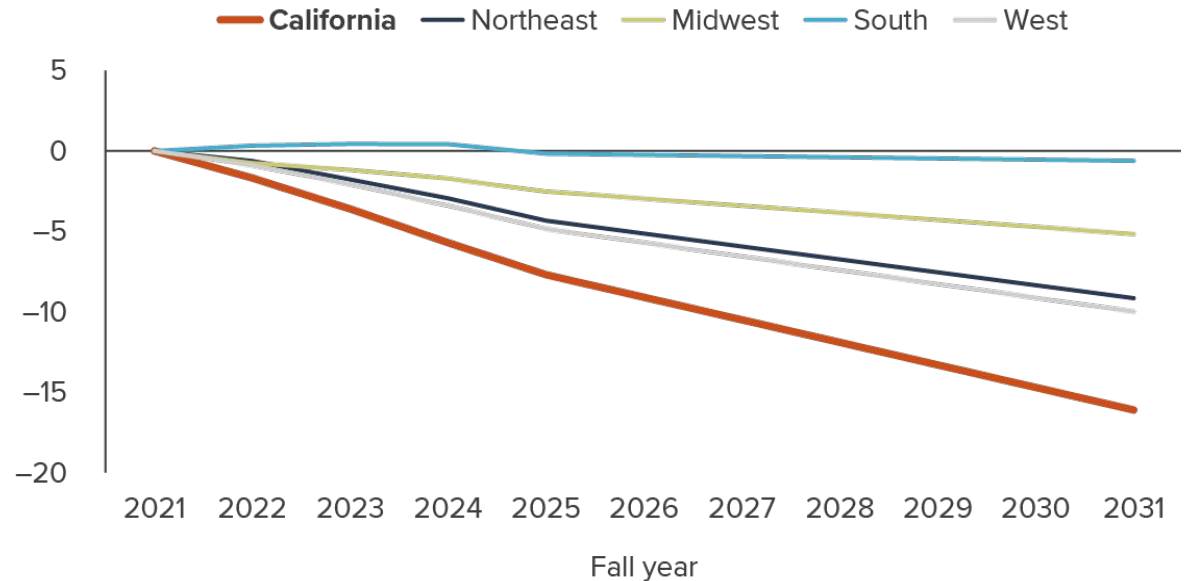
Agenda

① Current Landscape

The 2026-2027 Enrollment Cliff - Why Should We Care?

+ By 2026, California's high school graduation population is projected to decline by 15 percent.

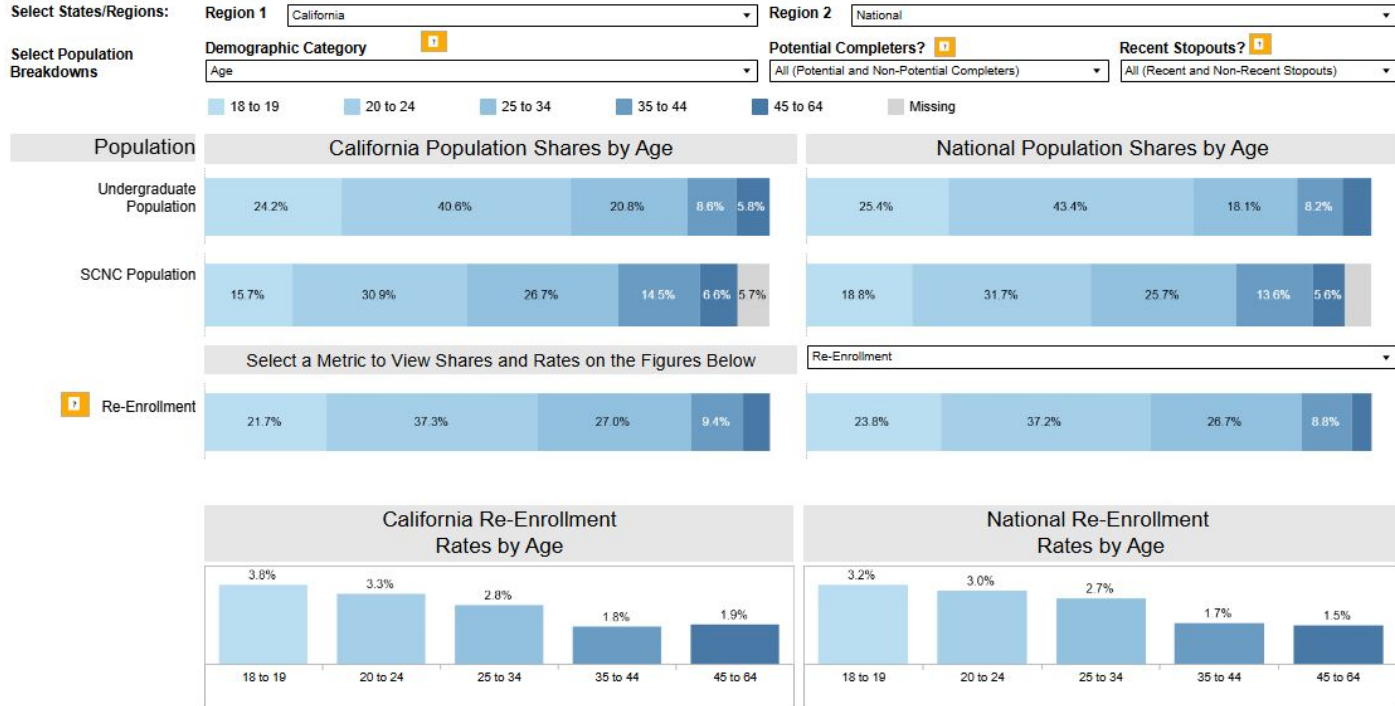+ Rural areas and parts of the Central Valley may see sharper declines.

California is projected to have larger K-12 enrollment declines than those in any other US region
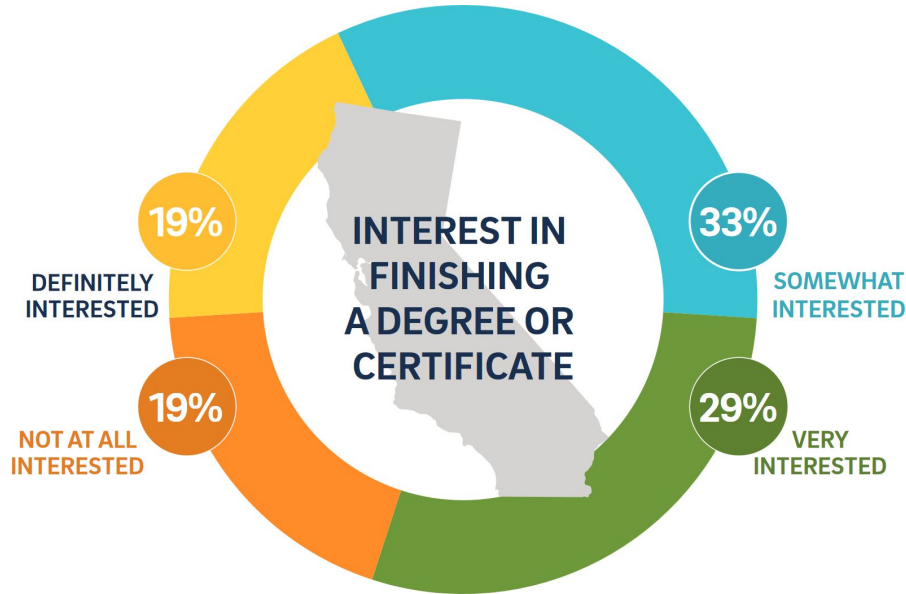

Source: National Center for Education Statistics

SCNC Dashboard

How Does the SCNC Population Compare Between California and the Nation?

Select States/Regions: Region 1: California — Region 2: National

Select Population Breakdowns: Demographic Category: Age — Potential Completers? All (Potential and Non-Potential Completers) — Recent Stopouts? All (Recent and Non-Recent Stopouts)

Legend: 18 to 19 | 20 to 24 | 25 to 34 | 35 to 44 | 45 to 64 | Missing

Population

California Population Shares by Age

Population	18 to 19	20 to 24	25 to 34	35 to 44	45 to 64
Undergraduate Population	24.2%	40.6%	20.8%	8.6%	5.8%
SCNC Population	15.7%	30.9%	26.7%	14.5%	6.6% / 5.7%

National Population Shares by Age

Population	18 to 19	20 to 24	25 to 34	35 to 44	45 to 64
Undergraduate Population	25.4%	43.4%	18.1%	8.2%	
SCNC Population	18.8%	31.7%	25.7%	13.6%	5.6%

Select a Metric to View Shares and Rates on the Figures Below — Re-Enrollment

Re-Enrollment (California): 21.7% | 37.3% | 27.0% | 9.4%

Re-Enrollment (National): 23.8% | 37.2% | 26.7% | 8.8%

California Re-Enrollment Rates by Age

18 to 19	20 to 24	25 to 34	35 to 44	45 to 64
3.8%	3.3%	2.8%	1.8%	1.9%

National Re-Enrollment Rates by Age

18 to 19	20 to 24	25 to 34	35 to 44	45 to 64
3.2%	3.0%	2.7%	1.7%	1.5%

Source: NSC Research Center

California Stop Out Survey

INTEREST IN FINISHING A DEGREE OR CERTIFICATE

33% SOMEWHAT INTERESTED

29% VERY INTERESTED

19% DEFINITELY INTERESTED

19% NOT AT ALL INTERESTED

REASONS FOR WANTING TO FINISH A CREDENTIAL

Reason	Percentage
Increase Income Earning Potential	29%
Achieve a Personal Goal	27%
Change My Career	
Personal Satisfaction	12%
Obtain Better Job or Promotion	10%
Be a Role Model for Others	7%
Other	1%
Required by My Employer	1%

Source: UC San Diego Extended Studies

How confident are you in your college's ability to identify and target adult learners through digital marketing?

ⓘ Presenting with animations, GIFs or speaker notes? Enable our Chrome extension

slido

Who Are Adult Learners? (And Why Are They Ignoring You?)

Six million Californians have some college credit but no credential.

+ Barriers preventing their return:

+ Cost and financial concerns

+ Time constraints (work, family obligations)

+ Lack of confidence in returning to school

+ Unclear connection between programs and job opportunities

WHAT WOULD MAKE IT EASIER FOR YOU TO RETURN TO FINISH A DEGREE OR FINISH A CERTIFICATE

Category	%
FINANCIAL AID	82%
FLEXIBLE COURSE SCHEDULING	49%
MONEY FOR LIVING EXPENSES	41%
ONLINE COURSES	39%
ACCELERATED COURSES	29%
COLLEGE CREDIT FOR JOB EXPERIENCE (E.G. PRIOR LEARNING ASSESSMENT)	27%
GUIDANCE WITH THE RE-ENROLLMENT PROCESS	24%
HELP COMPLETING PAPERWORK FOR RE-ENROLLING	23%
EDUCATION BENEFITS FROM EMPLOYER	21%
STABLE HOUSING	21%
HELP PAYING AN OUTSTANDING FEE	20%
KNOWING WHAT TO STUDY/MAJOR IN	20%
ABILITY TO TRANSFER COLLEGE CREDIT	17%
HELP ACCESSING PAST ENROLLMENT INFO (STUDENT ID, LOGIN, ETC.)	17%
TALK WITH ADMISSIONS ADVISOR	16%
ABILITY TO STOP OUT & RE-ENROLL	16%
HELP COMPLETING PAPERWORK REQ. TO GRADUATE	16%
HELP NAVIGATING COLLEGE OR UNIVERSITY WEBSITES/PORTALS	14%
TALKING WITH SOMEONE WHO HAS SUCCESSFULLY RE-ENROLLED	10%
OTHER	2%

Source: UC San Diego Extended Studies

The Competition – How Four-Year Institutions Are Targeting Adult Learners

More universities are:

+ Launching online, flexible, and accelerated degree programs

+ Targeting the some college, no credential (SCNC) population with aggressive digital marketing

+ Expanding certificate and micro-credential offerings

ASU Online®
Arizona State University

WGU
WESTERN GOVERNORS UNIVERSITY

CSU The California State University

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA UC Online

Own Your Community's Search with Local SEO

+ Your Google Business Profile **can rank on the search result page** in the form of a "Local Pack" and "College Pack" SERP features
+ **Optimize for "near me" searches** by including phrases like: *Classes near [neighborhood name], Online classes based in [City]*
+ **Make sure your GBP categories and offerings match search behavior**: "Adult Education," "Continuing Education"
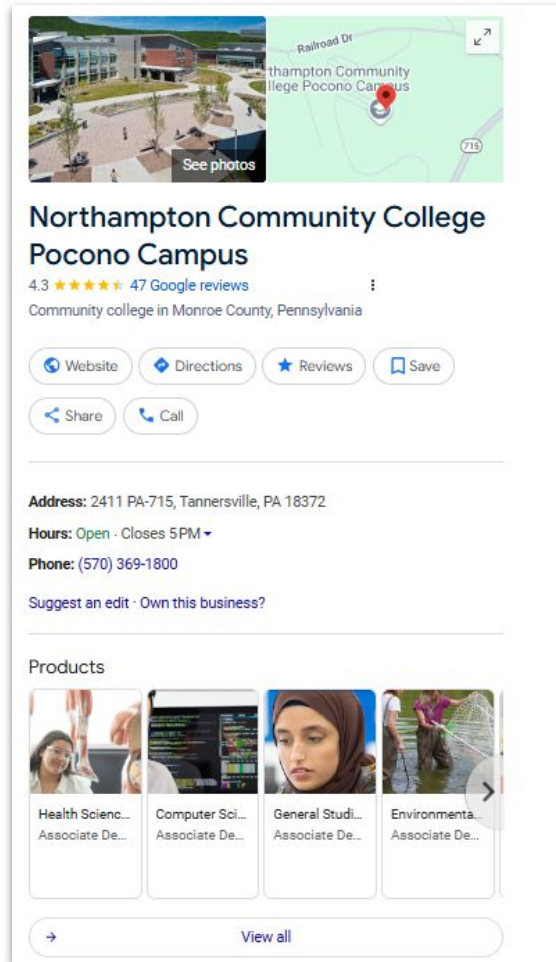
Posts and Events

Post about your campus news and promote your upcoming events to increase student engagement and get key messaging in front of your audience.

Post ideas: Open houses, campus tours, admission deadlines, and information sessions.
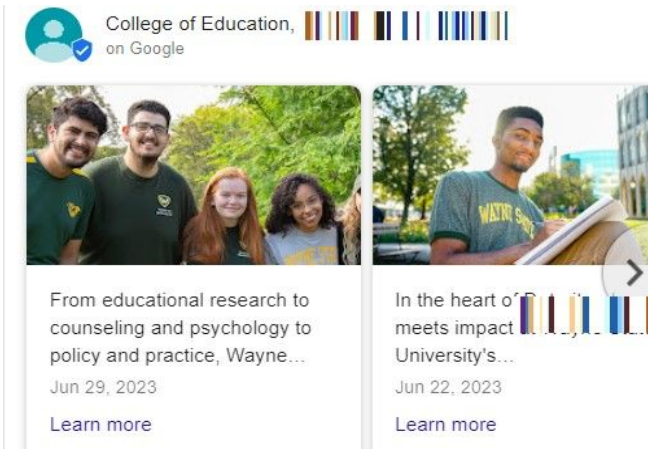
Case Study — Peralta Community College District's Approach
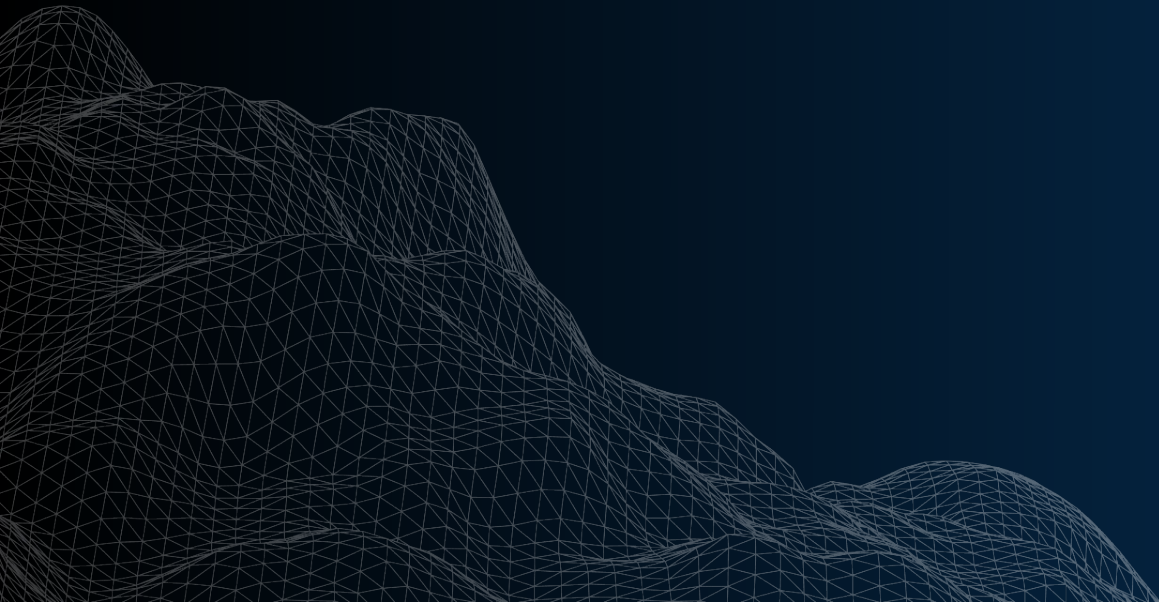
Peralta Community College District's Approach

+ **Community partnerships:** Northern Alameda Adult Education Collective.
+ **Hyper-targeted marketing efforts:** Digital advertising, live events like CTE Open House, and social media.
+ **Financial aid innovations:** "Ability to Benefit" program.

ETHNIC BACKGROUND

Latinx	Asian	Black	White	2 or more	Unknown	Pacific Islander	Native American
31%	20%	20%	19%	7%	3%	.5%	.2%

STUDENT HEADCOUNT

6352	COA
6518	BCC
9781	Laney
7190	Merritt
21497	Overall*
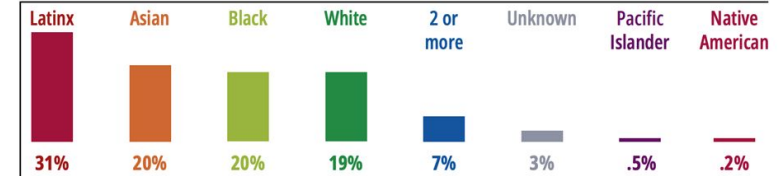
26%	Full Time Student
74%	Part Time Student
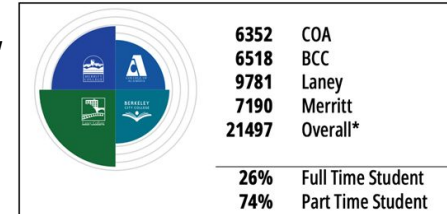
* Distinct headcounts for each college. The sum across all four colleges is expected to be greater than the distinct district headcount due to students who attend more than one of the colleges (multi-campus enrollment).

GENDER

55%	Female
39%	Male
6%	Non-Binary
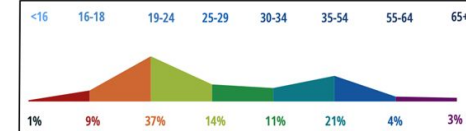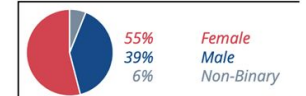
THE FOLLOWING STATISTICS REFLECT DISTRICT-WIDE FOR THE 23-24 ACADEMIC YEAR

DISTINCT COUNTS

Full-Time Equivalent Student (FTES)	14255
Number of Credit Sections	5805
Number of Non-Credit Sections	356
Transfer to UC or CSU	1093
Student to Counselor Ratio	480:1

Students Attending Multiple PCCD Colleges in the Same Term

At Least 2 PCCD Colleges	43%
More than two PCCD Colleges	17%

AGE GROUPS

<16	16-18	19-24	25-29	30-34	35-54	55-64	65+
1%	9%	37%	14%	11%	21%	4%	3%

Ability to Benefit

+ **GED programs:** You can take classes to prepare for the GED test, which is equivalent to a high school diploma.

+ **High school diploma programs:** These programs help you earn a high school diploma with flexible schedules and support to help you succeed.

+ **Job training programs:** The Peralta Colleges–Berkeley City College, College of Alameda, Laney College, and Merritt College – and Adult Schools offer programs that combine basic skills and job training to prepare you for work.

https://home.peralta.edu/atb

③ Hyper-Targeted Strategies
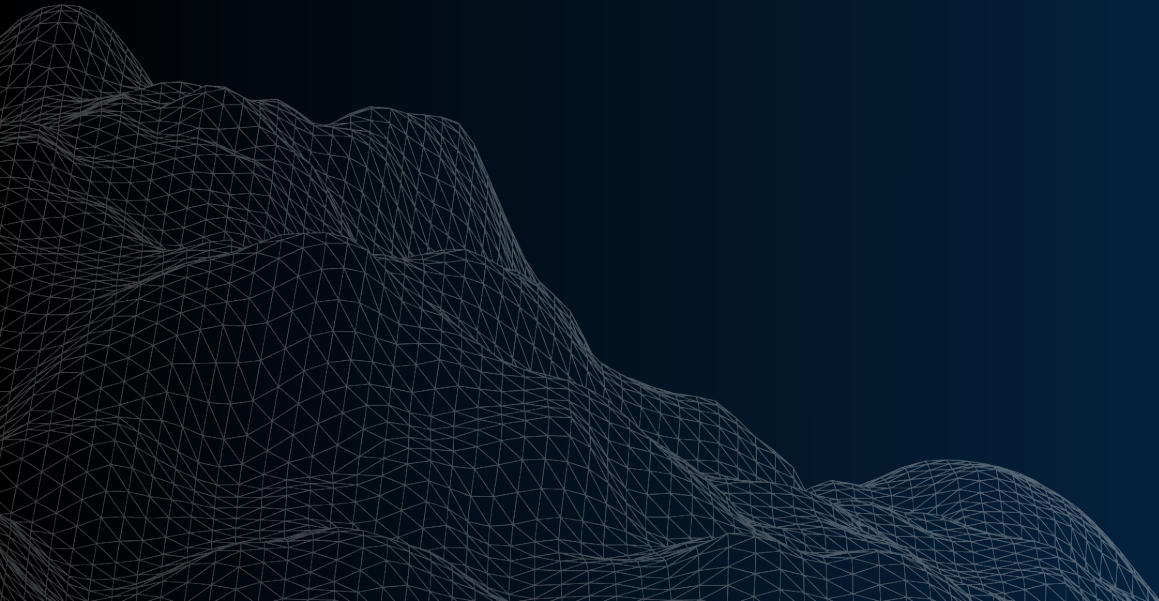
Aligning with California's Workforce Needs

High-growth sectors across the state:

+ Healthcare (Nursing, Medical Assisting, Respiratory Therapy)

+ Technology (Cybersecurity, Data Analytics, Software Development)

+ Green Energy (Solar Tech, EV Maintenance, Sustainability)

+ Advanced Manufacturing (Welding Technology, CAD/CAM Technology, Supply Chain & Logistics Management)

Targeting Tech-Minded Audiences

Aspiring Professionals	Career Changers	High School Audience	Military-Aligned Audience	Contextual Targeting-Technology
Ages 18-34 Within College's service area	Ages 25-44	Households with teens (15+); HHI under $55k	Ages 18 – 44	Ads placed on relevant tech content
Interests: Computers, Electronics, Tech Leadership	Currently in healthcare or white-collar roles Interests: Online Education, Computers, Tech Leadership	Interests: Computers, Tech Leadership	Education: High School/Some College Interests: Online Education, Tech Pathways	Topics: Computer Networking, Java, Linux, Network Security, Web Design & HTML, Computer Certification

High-Impact Advertising Strategies to Reach & Engage Community College Students

+ **Geofencing & Location-Based Ads**: Target local hotspots like libraries, coffee shops, high schools, and community hubs.

+ **Program-Specific Campaigns**: Target by career interests and workforce demands.

+ **Lookalike Audiences**: Find students with similar traits as current enrollees.

+ **Retargeting Ads**: Engage past website visitors and incomplete applications.

+ **Hyper-Local Out of Home:** Leverage zip codes and consumer data to deliver localized ads.

BRANDING

REACH AND ENGAGE

LEAD NURTURE

REGISTER

How to Find and Target Adult Learners: Behavior Based Targeting

Detailed targeting
Include people who match ⓘ

🔍 Add demographics, interests or behaviors

▼ Demographics
  ▸ Education
  ▸ Financial
  ▸ Life events
  ▸ Parents
  ▸ Relationship
  ▸ Work

▼ Interests
  ▸ Business and industry
  ▸ Entertainment (leisure)
  ▸ Family and relationships
  ▸ Fitness and wellness (fitness)
  ▸ Food and drink (consumables)
  ▸ Hobbies and activities
  ▸ Shopping and fashion

∞ Meta

Detailed targeting   ✏ Edit

People who match:
- Interests: Occupational Safety and Health Administration, Veterans Health Administration or Society for Public Health Education
- School: Social Work
- Field of study: Social Work, Public health, Medical research or Social Work/Sociology
- Employers: Social Work or Public health
- Job title: Social Work, Social Worker Assistant, Clinical Social Worker or Licensed Social Worker
- Industry: Community and Social Services

Key Messaging Tactics

| Solve a Problem	Make it clear how your message addresses a specific challenge your audience faces.
Show Urgency	Create a sense of timeliness– why does this matter right now?
Make it Personal	Speak directly to your audience with a human-centered, relatable message.

Rethinking Enrollment - Meet Students Where They Are

Adult learners aren't looking for 'college.' They're looking for career advancement, job security, and higher wages.

❌ Say This	✅ Say That
~~Earn an associate's degree~~	*Get job-ready in under a year with a fast-track certificate.*
~~Flexible class schedules~~	*Learn on your terms—at home, after work, or on weekends.*
~~Study business administration~~	*Prepare for promotions with in-demand business skills.*
~~Welcome to college life~~	*College designed for real life—work, kids, bills and all.*
~~Apply now~~	*You're more ready than you think. We'll help you every step of the way.*

Playbook for Enrollment Growth
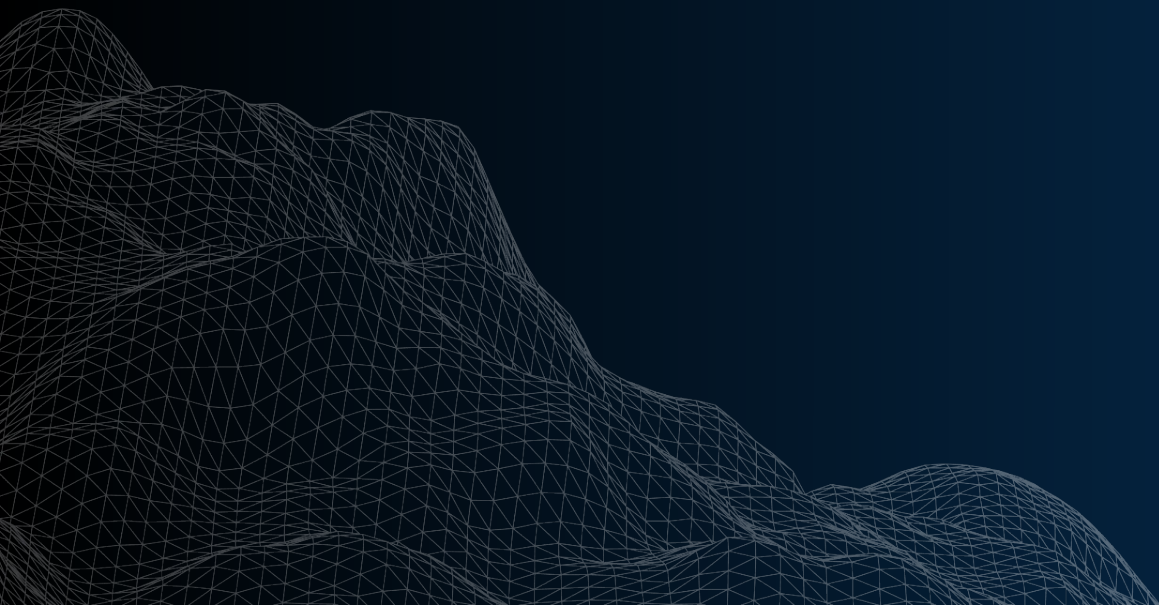
Audit. Define. Align. Launch. Optimize.

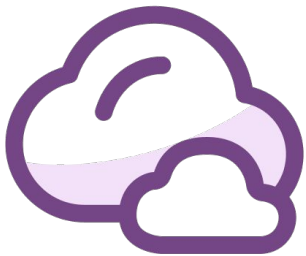| Step 1	Audit your current marketing—where are the gaps?
Step 2	Create a sense of timeliness– why does this matter right now?
Step 3	Align program messaging with workforce demand.
Step 4	Launch hyper-targeted ad campaigns.
Step 5	Track, analyze, and optimize continuously.

What's one word or phrase that captures your next step in reaching adult learners?

Key Takeaways

+ **Hyper-Targeting Saves Money.** Focus on engaged audiences.

+ **Local SEO Boosts Visibility.** Ensure students find you online.

+ **Even Small Budgets Can Have Big Impact.** Prioritize cost-effective strategies.

Thank You!

Kristy Phillips, Ed.D.

kphillips@claruscorporation.com

210 Littleton Road, Suite 100
Westford, MA 01886
978.692.5092
info@carnegiehighered.com
claruscorporation.com

Resources

Dive Deeper

CLARUS Blog

Carnegie Blog

Download

Enrollment Match Fact Sheet

Explore

Partner with CLARUS