

ADULT LEARNERS AT TRI-C

Evidence, context, and strategic implications

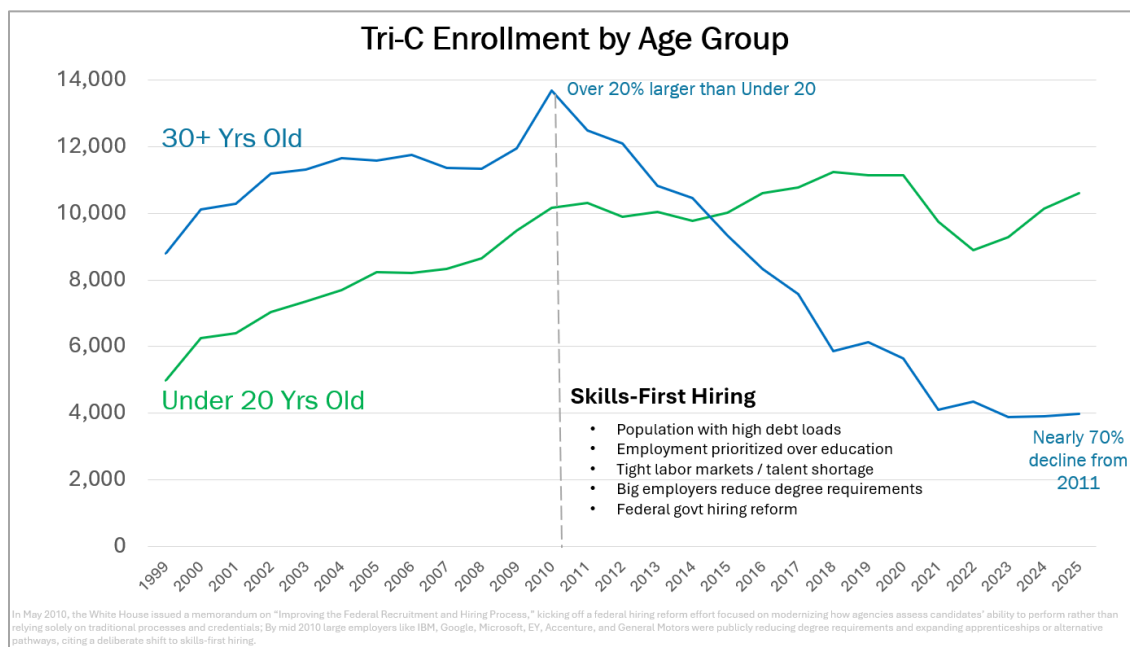
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Purpose and scope

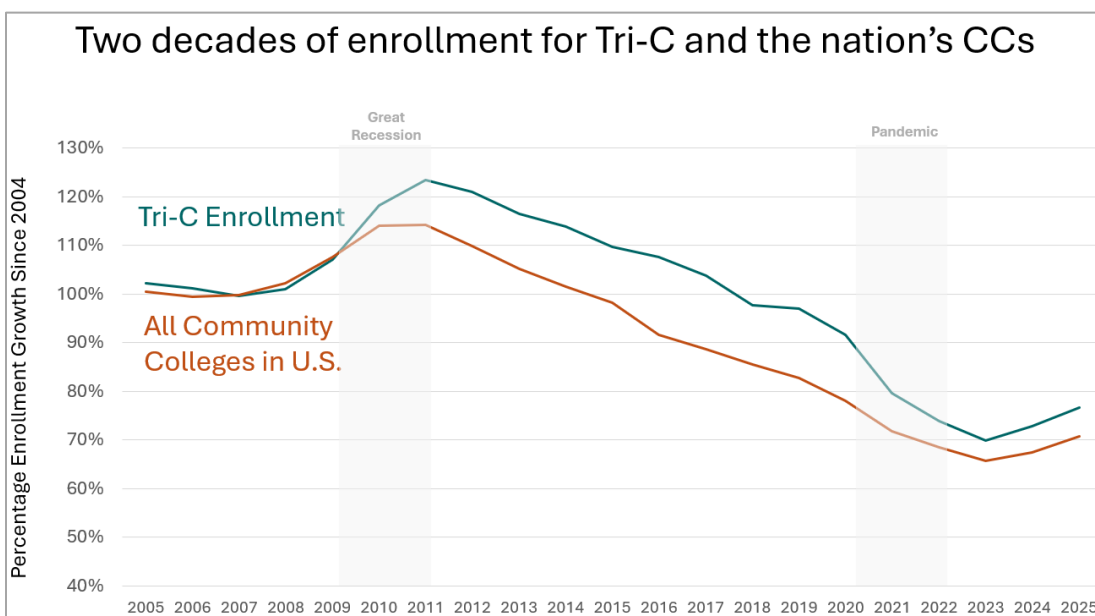
Cuyahoga Community College (Tri-C) is encountering greater competition for adult learners in its local and regional markets, as more providers offer short, flexible programs aimed at working adults. Building an effective response will require bringing together three strands of evidence: a clear view of how Tri-C's enrollment has shifted away from adults over the past decade, a grounded understanding of regional adult demand and market conditions, and insights from recent scholarship on how today's adult learners search, decide, and persist. This document synthesizes three sources of evidence: Tri-C enrollment trends, external market research, and the literature on adult behavior, in order to frame where the College stands now and what adults are signaling they need. It then uses that synthesis to outline a strategic direction for Tri-C centered on adult learners that builds on the College's existing cost advantage by focusing on flexible, stackable programs and a simpler path from intent to enrollment and completion.

What Tri-C data reveal about adult learners

Tri-C's enrollment data over the past fifteen years suggest a major shift in who the College is reaching successfully. The Enrollment by Age Group graphic below captures the pattern.



As the graphic shows, students age 30 and older outnumbered those under 20 by more than 20 percent at their peak around 2011, then declined steeply over the following decade while younger enrollment remained comparatively more stable. The timing of this shift aligns with broader changes in the higher education and labor market environment. After earlier recessions, community colleges typically saw enrollment stabilize or grow as displaced workers returned to school, but the post-2011 recovery did not follow that pattern. Employers increasingly relaxed degree requirements, expanded apprenticeships and internal training, and opened more jobs to candidates without college credentials. Those changes gave many adults additional ways to gain or signal skills, often through shorter or more targeted learning experiences. At the same time, rising living costs and existing debt loads made it more difficult for adults to step away from work or caregiving to pursue longer programs.



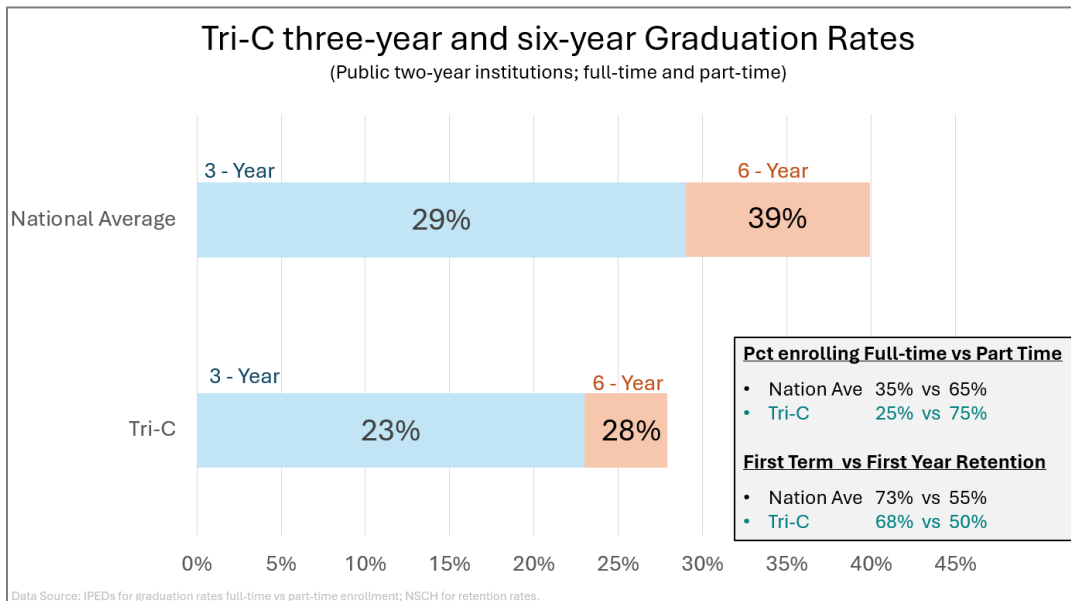
Internal analyses confirm the scale of this shift: learners 30 and older account for roughly 60 percent of Tri-C's total headcount decline, a proportion that mirrors nationwide estimates. The resulting pattern is visible in the age-trend data above — adults who once enrolled at Tri-C in large numbers now enroll at much lower rates, even as younger students have not declined in the same way. The College's enrollment challenge, in other words, is concentrated less in broad softening across all segments than in a pronounced erosion in adult participation.

This early enrollment picture sets the stage for a second question: not just who is enrolling, but how well they are able to build momentum and complete once they arrive.

Early momentum and completion patterns compared to peers

A similar pattern appears in measures of early momentum and completion. Nationally, the graduation rate for public two-year colleges rises from about 29 percent at three years to 39 percent at six years, while Tri-C's rate increases from 23 percent to 28 percent. The same

data show that Tri-C enrolls about 25 percent of its students full-time compared to 35 percent at public two-year colleges overall, and that first-term retention stands at about 68 percent and first-year retention at about 50 percent, both below national benchmarks for similar institutions.



Because full-time enrollment and early retention are closely associated with stronger progression and on-time completion, these gaps highlight an underlying momentum problem rather than a single-point outcome issue.

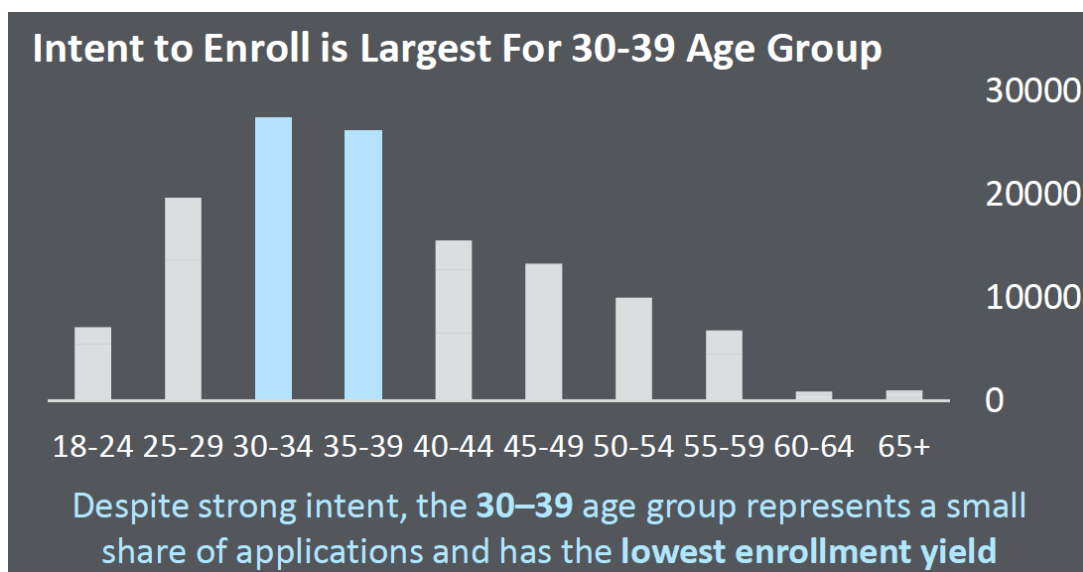
Although these figures are not limited to adults, they point to a structural pattern that matters most for adults. The scholarship on adult learners reminds us that adult students, especially those in their late twenties through their mid-forties, are especially likely to study part-time, to combine college with full-time work and caregiving, and to step away when work, family, or financial pressures intensify, returning only when they can see a clear, shorter next step rather than a long, uncertain degree path. In a setting where early retention is weaker, full-time enrollment is less common, and additional time to degree produces smaller gains in completion than at comparable colleges, adults who need more time or more flexible pacing are at particular risk of never realizing the payoff of the time and money they invest.

This mismatch between how adults attend and how progress is currently structured points toward a specific design challenge. Many adults are not looking for a traditional associate degree with its two-year commitment but for shorter, focused credentials they can complete quickly, use in the labor market, and, if they choose, stack into a larger program later. The central implication is that Tri-C cannot treat time alone as a solution; it will need to design programs and pathways so that adults can build early momentum, recover from interruptions, and complete shorter, stackable credentials that add up to real value.

Seen on their own, these momentum gaps suggest a structural challenge; read alongside regional market research, they help clarify whether the issue is weak demand or a disconnect between how adults want to enroll and how Tri-C is currently organized.

Regional intent to enroll and adult demand

External market research conducted for Tri-C by Huron Consulting Group adds a regional lens to these internal patterns. Their analysis estimates that roughly 129,000 individuals across the service area express intent to enroll in some form of postsecondary education, with the largest concentration in the 30–39 age group and a substantial share in the adjacent 25–29 and 40–44 bands. If Tri-C were to capture just 2–4 percent of these adults over the next several years, that would translate to roughly 2,500–5,000 additional adult learners.



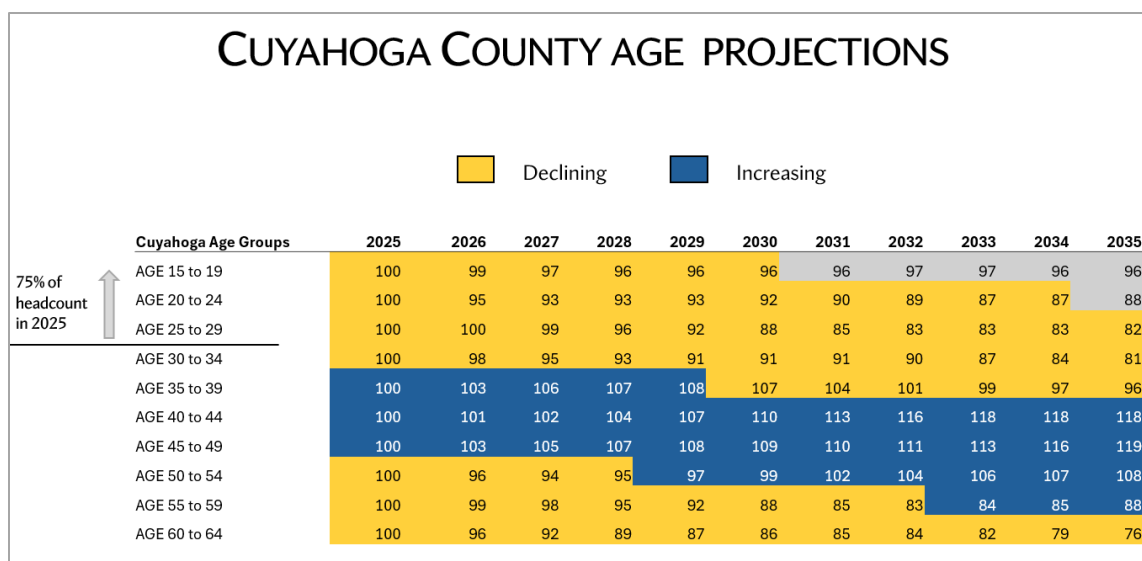
Huron's preliminary work also shows that this strong adult intent does not currently translate into comparable application volume or enrollment yield for Tri-C, particularly among those in their thirties. Adults in the service area are not a marginal audience but a primary source of potential demand – and the age groups that represent the College's largest potential pipeline are underrepresented in its current applicant pool.

The same research highlights patterns that help explain this gap. Adults in the regional target market identify time constraints and difficulty signing up as top barriers, and only a minority prefer fully in-person learning, with most gravitating toward hybrid or fully online options that offer greater control over schedule. Program preferences lean toward healthcare and skilled trades and other short, work-focused offerings, which align closely with the types of shorter, stackable credentials discussed earlier in this paper. Read together with Tri-C's early momentum and completion data, these findings suggest that the more immediate issue may lie less in adult interest itself than in whether Tri-C's formats, pathways, and enrollment processes are experienced as feasible, flexible, and clearly worthwhile by adults who already show intent to enroll.

If adults with strong intent to enroll are not currently choosing Tri-C at expected rates, it becomes important to understand whether this is a short-term pattern or one that will be amplified by long-term demographic change.

Regional demographics and future enrollment pressure

The demographic outlook for Cuyahoga County adds another layer to this challenge. Age-projection data indicate that the traditional college-age population (roughly ages 15 to 24), which currently accounts for a large share of Tri-C’s headcount, is expected to shrink or remain flat over the next decade. By contrast, most age bands from the mid-30s through the late-50s are projected to grow. The Cuyahoga County age-projection graphic highlights this pattern, with declining or stagnant numbers in the younger cohorts and steady increases in many prime working-age groups. Taken together, the projections suggest that relying on traditional-age students to rebuild enrollment will become increasingly difficult, while the adult population in the region is likely to expand.



Note: the figures in the graphic above are normalized growth values anchored on 2025 demographic totals.

The strategic significance of this demographic shift is straightforward: the local population is projected to grow precisely in the age ranges where the College has seen the steepest enrollment decline. Combined with the Huron findings on adult intent and conversion discussed above, the enrollment, completion, and demographic evidence converge on the same conclusion – Tri-C's future growth and impact will depend on how effectively the College can attract, support, and credential adult learners. The College's historic strengths, on their own, are not reaching this population at the levels seen in earlier years, which points toward a need for deeper analysis of how adults in the region are making choices and what they are seeking from postsecondary education.

These demographic pressures sharpen the stakes of the adult learner opportunity, but they do not, on their own, explain how adults make decisions or what they are looking for from institutions like Tri-C.

Literature review on adult learning

Understanding Today's Adult Learners

Adult learners represent one of the most important growth markets in higher education, although they are often misunderstood when institutions treat them as an older version of the traditional undergraduate. The literature instead describes a population shaped by work, caregiving, prior college experience, financial constraints, and a practical need to fit education into an already full life. Many are returning after stopping out, many compare only a small number of institutions, and many move through the search process with far less patience for friction than colleges often assume. Recent studies on adults with some college but no credential emphasize that decisions to **reengage hinge on whether institutions make the path back feel simple, affordable, and worth the disruption to an already complex life.**

The Demand for Clarity and an Improved Digital Journey

Across studies, **adult learners consistently express a preference for clarity.** They want to know what a program costs, how long it will take, whether it will fit their schedule, and what it is likely to lead to. They do not typically approach the search process as an open-ended search; they are purposeful, efficient, and often decisive. Research shows that they are increasingly independent in how they search, often remaining unknown to institutions until late in the process, while relying heavily on institutional websites and other direct digital resources to answer their questions. For many adults, this search is closely connected to questions about how to pay, including confusion about aid options, employer benefits, credit for prior learning, and the total out-of-pocket cost over time. In this environment, the website functions not only as a marketing asset but also as a primary enrollment experience and financial planning tool, long before there is any conversation with staff.

Affordability, Perceived Value, and the “How to Pay” Question

Cost appears in the literature as the most powerful filter for adults considering a return to education. Adult learners may care about mission, reputation, or personal meaning, but **affordability determines which options stay under serious consideration.** Degree-completer studies show that many adults set relatively low annual price thresholds and expect to depend on financial aid. Other research finds that adults often underestimate the aid they might receive and overestimate the risk of taking on additional debt, leading them to abandon otherwise suitable options when pricing and financing pathways are unclear. When price is opaque or fragmented, institutions tend to lose these students quickly.

Flexibility, Modality, and Adult Participation

Flexibility is described not as a convenience, but as a condition of participation for many adults. Studies indicate a preference for formats that give learners meaningful control over time, especially asynchronous and mixed-modality options, while still valuing in-person experiences when those experiences feel worth the commute. Adults are willing to come to campus but resist doing so unnecessarily. The most responsive models in the research combine predominantly asynchronous coursework with deliberate, high-value synchronous touchpoints for applied learning, community, and mentorship. In these models, flexibility is designed into the academic product—course formats, term lengths, schedules, and assessment—rather than treated as a separate service promise.

Motivation, Meaning, and the Joining of Practical and Human Value

The literature complicates the notion that adult learners are motivated only by job advancement or higher wages. Career mobility remains a central driver, but many adult students and degree completers describe their return to higher education using language of purpose, personal fulfillment, and the desire to do meaningful work. **The strongest institutional messages in the research are those that join practical value with human value.** Adults want evidence that a program is worth the investment—clear labor-market outcomes, stackable credentials, and employer relevance—while also wanting to see how it connects to identity, contribution, and a more satisfying future.

Labor Market Change, Stackability, and Skills-First Pathways

The broader market is becoming less forgiving to institutions that lack a clear position, as higher education moves toward clearer segmentation in which some providers compete on price and others on distinctive premium experiences. At the same time, the connection between degrees and careers is becoming less linear, skill requirements are changing more quickly, and labor shortages remain serious in many fields. Studies of stackable community college pathways show that **adults who add short-term certificates and additional credentials over time often see meaningful gains in employment and wages**, which supports the value of visible, stackable routes rather than isolated programs. Policy analyses also document increased state investment in short-term, workforce-aligned credentials, particularly aimed at adult learners and those with some college but no credential, creating more options for adults across provider types.

Connecting the Evidence to Tri-C's Position

The skills-first credentials research adds another important dimension to the Tri-C picture because it shows that shorter, focused, stackable credentials have real labor-market appeal, particularly for adults with nonlinear educational and work histories, even as employers continue to seek clearer signals and better translation between credentials and specific roles. Adults in these studies are especially responsive when they can see how a short, lower-risk

credential connects to an immediate job or promotion and how that credential in turn stacks into higher-level certificates and degrees with cumulative wage gains over time. When read alongside Tri-C's enrollment trends, this evidence points to a potential opportunity for the College: not only to expand short-term, skills-aligned offerings, but to organize and communicate them as coherent pathways that employers recognize and that students can navigate without needing insider knowledge.

The sector-level trends documented in Tri-C's own research on post-2011 labor market shifts suggest that several of the College's core program areas, including IT and cybersecurity, healthcare, and skilled trades, sit in fields where employer demand remains strong but where credentialing expectations and hiring pathways have changed substantially. In technology, employers have shifted toward skills-based hiring and alternative credentials; in healthcare, degree expectations have risen for the most sought-after roles; and in manufacturing and the trades, direct-entry employment and apprenticeships have drawn potential students away from traditional programs. These patterns point to an opportunity for Tri-C to examine how its current program mix aligns with regional demand at a more granular level, matching enrollment capacity against job openings, wage outcomes, and employer hiring behavior, to identify where the College's existing strengths are underutilized and where program investment may need to shift.

From Interpretation to Strategy

Taken together, the findings suggest that Tri-C has several characteristics that appear relevant to the preferences adults describe in the literature, especially around cost, duration, schedule fit, and career payoff. That alignment does not by itself establish a competitive advantage, but it does suggest that the College may have a plausible basis for serving this population more effectively if those features are made more visible and operationally coherent. In regional terms, there appears to be room for an institution that also answers the questions adults face after those threshold decisions: how to pay for it and use employer benefits, where prior credits and work experience count, and what concrete next step a credential opens. Because that position depends on combining an existing low price point with flexible delivery, stackable program design, robust recognition of prior learning, and visible employer relevance at the same time, it is not easily replicated by many four-year institutions and may align closely with Tri-C's mission and capabilities.

Implications and possible next steps

The evidence presented in this document points toward several areas that warrant further institutional attention. While affordability is central to how adults evaluate postsecondary options, the research and market data suggest that low cost alone is unlikely to be sufficient. Adults are also filtering on clarity, flexibility, credential value, and ease of entry, and the competitive landscape is not standing still. The implication is that Tri-C's response will need to extend well beyond its cost advantage.

Deeper segmentation of the adult population. This paper treats adult learners as a broad category, but the data suggest that different segments within that population present different levels of opportunity for Tri-C. Adults in their thirties, adults with some college but no credential, and adults concentrated in specific program areas each represent distinct profiles in terms of market demand, likelihood of conversion, and institutional readiness. A more granular analysis of these segments, drawing on enrollment history, regional demographic data, and the Huron market research, would help identify where the College's highest-return opportunities are most concentrated.

Program alignment and employer connection. The enrollment and labor-market evidence suggests that Tri-C's opportunity with adults depends less on being the lowest-cost option, which the College already is for most regional learners, than on making credentials visibly connected to specific roles, wage progression, and employer hiring expectations. Affordability gets Tri-C onto the consideration list; program relevance and career clarity are what appear to drive the enrollment decision. Whether and how to strengthen that connection across programs is a question for academic and workforce leadership.

Institutional design and the adult experience. The literature and market data consistently indicate that adults filter on cost, search independently through digital channels, and treat flexibility as a condition of participation rather than a preference. If those patterns hold for Tri-C's service area, they carry implications for website architecture, enrollment process design, scheduling, modality, prior learning assessment, and reengagement strategy. These are areas where operational leaders across enrollment, marketing, student affairs, and academic functions would need to assess what changes, if any, are warranted.

This document is intended as an evidence base, not a strategic plan. The consistent thread across the areas above is that the College's existing cost advantage, while real, is not by itself converting adult interest into enrollment at the levels the market data suggest are possible. The gap sits in design, experience, and visibility. The broader questions of program design, institutional process, and cross-functional coordination belong to the leaders best positioned to evaluate and act on them.

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