

# Secondary Research: Adult Learners

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STAMATS

# Adult Learners and Higher Education



# Who are “Adult Learners?”

- In higher education, the term “adult learner” has traditionally meant a student who is 25 years of age or older. This is a simplistic approach, and does not fully take into consideration:
  - The definition of an adult, according to Malcolm Knowles, author of ground-breaking research regarding adult learners, and generally accepted among professionals as the expert in the field:  
***“The psychological definition is one who has arrived at a self-concept of being responsible for one’s own life, of being self-directing.”***
  - The differences between generations. This is an important distinction because studies show that life experiences brought to the table by adult learners have a definite influence upon *how* they learn
- The fact that adults are self-directing has a plausible impact on if, how, and why they undertake postsecondary education, as well as effecting their success in meeting their goals once they do
- For the purposes of establishing programs and eliminating barriers for adult learners, we must then consider, for example, an 18-year-old student who is married or has a child. In addition, to be effective in understanding the challenges and instituting incentives for adult learners, we must be specific in the knowledge of generational differences



# Generational Differences

- For the purposes of this study, we will consider the *Millennial Generation* generally to be traditional students, as they are between the ages of 18 and 24. It will be important to remember, however, that there are those within this generation who can be considered adult learners based upon life experiences and challenges, and who are self-directed in life
- We shall consider the *Silent Generation*, those born before 1943 and 65 years of age or over, to be outside the population that would normally return to postsecondary education. Again, however, there will be exceptions who end up in college classrooms, but who have different reasons for being there than their adult counterparts in *Generation X* (born between 1961 and 1981; ages 26-46) and the *Boomers* (born between 1943 and 1960; ages 47-64)
- Members of the *Silent Generation* generally end up in college classrooms for reasons of personal fulfillment; while *Generation X* and *Boomers* are meeting the challenges of professional advancement and increasing their worth on the job market
- Since *Generation X* and *Boomers* make up the majority of adult learners, we will examine some specific generational characteristics of these groups



# Generational Differences in Learning

<p><b><i>Boomers</i></b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Enjoy working in creative and independent manners</li><li>• Sensitive to criticism</li><li>• Often possess significant professional experience</li><li>• Require lots of interaction and “talk” time</li><li>• Enjoy icebreaker and introduction activities</li><li>• Prefer a spirit of collegiality in classroom</li><li>• May have problems with authoritarian instructors</li><li>• Will often take on leadership role in groups</li><li>• Do not generally like role-play exercises</li><li>• Need plenty of time to practice new skills alone</li></ul>
<p><b><i>Generation X</i></b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Self-reliant</li><li>• Require regular, if not constant, feedback</li><li>• May lack interpersonal skills</li><li>• Can be cynical</li><li>• Require relevance in assignments and courses</li><li>• Often impatient</li><li>• Consider themselves to be technologically capable</li><li>• Are adaptable and informal</li><li>• School/life balance is important</li><li>• Will resist group work outside of class</li><li>• Need lots of individual attention</li></ul>

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# Generational Differences

- It is important to note that *Gen Xers* are the first generation to be less educated than their parents. Aspiring to role models such as Bill Gates, they tended to strike out after high school without college educations to make their way in the work world. For example, only 37% of the *Gen X* class of 1980 had completed college within seven years of graduating from high school, compared to 58% of *Boomers*
- Consequently, many *Gen Xers* later find themselves needing skills and education that they hadn't counted on, and, often end up back in school at a later stage in life. Currently, they are the largest segment of online learners
- With 78 million *Boomers* in the U.S., this generation is used to being at the forefront and live in a world that has been responsive to their wants and needs. They are used to being the center of attention, and are not used to being pushed in to the background. This attitude comes across whether at home, on the job, or in the classroom
- *Boomers* returning to school are achievement-oriented and internally focused, tending to put heavy emphasis on grades. Still, they tend to have a great deal of anxiety about going back to school, and need constant reassurance in the form of feedback



# Fast Facts

- 39% of adult learners work full-time while enrolled in postsecondary education
- About 30% of adults seeking a college degree need some type of remedial education in one or more subjects
- Recent studies reveal that those most in need of adult education receive it least often
- There are at least 10 times as many federal programs designed for traditional degree-seeking students as those aimed at non-degree education and training programs designed for adults
- 34 million new jobs which required postsecondary education were created between 1980 and 1997, while during the same time, about seven million jobs that require only a high school diploma were eliminated
- Most adult students leave college without a degree because of family related or personal finance issues (including job-related issues and the cost of an education)



# Fast Facts

- Almost one-fourth of adults who did not complete a bachelor's degree say that they intend to return to college within the next two years
- The likelihood of returning to college is most positively effected by the availability of accelerated programs, convenience of location, tuition assistance, and college credit received for life experiences or professional skills
- According to the U.S. Department of Education, adult students are the fastest growing educational demographic
- Students 35 years or older numbered 823,000 in 1970 and 2.9 million in 2001



# The Psychology of the Adult Learner

- Malcolm Knowles coined the term **andragogy (as opposed to pedagogy)**, which asserts that adults come to the table with a different set of experiences than children and therefore, require characteristic elements within an educational context. In fact, the very likelihood that adult learners will ever even cross the threshold of higher education classrooms can be very dependent upon whether or not those educational opportunities encompass the components that distinguish them from programs geared towards the traditional student
  - Before they will invest in education, adult learners will need to know *why* they need the knowledge they will gain
  - Adults have an established concept of self, and will not do well in situations where the value of their life experiences are discounted or unrecognized
  - Adults need to make connections between the knowledge they already possess (life experiences) and new knowledge
  - Adults are problem-oriented, and are motivated toward resolving specific issues and less so towards abstract notions of learning
  - While children require motivational rewards towards learning, adults are motivated by the relevancy of what they are learning



# Psychology of the Adult Learner

## Incentives/Motivation — Barriers/Challenges

- Is there a relevant and practical reason for learning?
  - Adult learners need connection between education it's real-world applications in their lives, such as career enhancement or a personal goal
  - The investment in time and money must be justified by the benefits of education
  - Adult learners resent “busy work,” and resist having to spend valuable time on tasks that do not directly work towards their goals (i.e. general education requirements aimed towards making a traditional student “well-rounded” when what the adult student needs is computer skills or other technical knowledge)
- Does the learning experience contribute to and expand their self-identity?
  - Ignoring, failing to value, or not utilizing an adult learner's life experiences rejects not only the experience, but the person
  - Life experiences need to be attributed significance, not only as a resource for learning, but in recognition of the significance of the adult learner him/herself
  - Traditional values and assumptions are often challenged, putting adult learners at risk of losing their cultural identity



# Psychology of the Adult Learner

## Incentives/Motivation — Barriers/Challenges

- Is the educational setting self-directed rather than subject- or teacher-centered?
  - Adult learners often resent an authoritarian style of teaching and, instead, prefer self-direction with a facilitator
  - Often adult learners will resist group work; however, when forced to work in a group they will take on the role of leader
  - Motivation for adult learners takes the form of resolving specific problems that will bring about tangible results, making them more successful in independent study situations
  - Adult learners tend to immediately apply what they have learned
- Does the adult learner enter the educational landscape as stranger in a foreign land?
  - As an adult whose place is established within family, at work, and in social settings, going back to school places him/her into an unfamiliar and often uncomfortable setting
  - Providing a peer setting for education with adults facilitates a feeling of belonging, increasing success



# Frustrations for Adult Learners

- “I’m a bag lady. I shuffle around the school in winter with two bags – one for books and one for boots. I have no place to sit, to receive messages, to make phone calls. I am dependent upon professors letting me come into their offices. I have no way to hear if my child is ill. I have no dignity”
- “I don’t understand why I need to take a religion class to round me out as a person when I’ve spent the last 9 years volunteering with our community inter-religious council. Shouldn’t what I already know count for something?”
- “The worst is when the professor tells our class to break up into groups for a project. These kids all live in dorms together and quickly form little ‘cliques.’ Meanwhile, I always have to ask if I can join an established group and feel like the booby prize. Besides, when we work in groups, I’m the only one with my frame of reference for what we are doing”
- “I really get tired of moving heaven and earth to get to class and then spending an hour being lectured on things that I could have just as easily read about from home without having to find someone to care for my children or reschedule my work”
- “Sometimes I just want to scream when I hear students who do nothing **but** go to school complain about how hard it is to find enough time to study or get assignments done. I’d love to tell them what it’s like to have a sick child and a boss who needs you to work overtime the day before finals, but they just wouldn’t get it”
- “I never met my advisor. The office hours don’t fit with my hours”



# Institutional Response to Adult Learners

- Too often colleges and universities think that if they provide some financial aid, online courses, and flexible scheduling that they have successfully accommodated the needs of adult learners. While this is helpful, it does not take into consideration the learning styles of adult learners, nor the skills and experiences they bring to an educational setting
- “More than 30 percent of today’s college students are adult learners, yet many aspects of the higher education system are not designed with these students in mind. Whether they’re pursuing conventional degrees, earning professional credentials, updating their skills or earning prerequisites for another level of courses, adult students have needs that higher education must better understand” (Lumina Foundation, 2003)
- “Some sources suggest that institutions treat adult learners as invisible. Inflexibility with regard to transfer credits, class scheduling, and/or payment options makes it difficult for some adults to access higher education” (Lumina Foundation, 2003)
- The Lumina Foundation reports that there are three dimensions which are primary in consideration of how adult learners progress (or fail to progress) in postsecondary education: **access**, **persistence** and **success**. Along with state and federal policies, Lumina examines the role of the individual and the institution in increasing the likelihood of all three elements



# Institutional Response to Adult Learners

	Access is increased by...	Persistence is increased by...	Success is increased by...
Individual	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Online courses/resources</li> <li>• Financial aid</li> <li>• Community colleges</li> <li>• Accelerated programs</li> <li>• Off-campus centers/satellite campuses</li> <li>• Multiple/flexible class schedules (night, weekend, once-a-week three-hour courses, etc.)</li> <li>• Child care availability</li> <li>• Positive perception of self</li> <li>• Positive perception of social/economic value</li> <li>• Employer support</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Off-campus learning centers</li> <li>• Desire for gainful employment/job advancement</li> <li>• Intrinsic rewards of self-improvement</li> <li>• Perception of being valued by institution</li> <li>• Employer support</li> <li>• Social networks outside classroom</li> <li>• Social networks on campus w/other adults</li> <li>• Clarity regarding expectations/requirements</li> <li>• Adult-centered approach of institution</li> <li>• Credit transferability</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Individual characteristics</li> <li>• Financial aid</li> <li>• Admissions counselors responsive to adult needs</li> <li>• Perception of being valued by institution</li> <li>• Faculty, counselor, administration communication</li> <li>• Courses that lead to professional advancement</li> <li>• Family support</li> <li>• Adequate study time</li> </ul>
Institution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Distance learning, off-campus centers</li> <li>• Collaboration with community organizations to provide locations for learning</li> <li>• Alternate scheduling for academic and financial aid advisors, administrators</li> <li>• Accelerated programs</li> <li>• Alternate scheduling (night, weekend and one-time-a-week three-hour courses)</li> <li>• Higher visibility of adult students</li> <li>• Support programs such as child care</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Effective, accessible academic advisors/counselors</li> <li>• Adult support services</li> <li>• Establishment of adult learning communities</li> <li>• Acceptance of transfer credits</li> <li>• Credit for experience</li> <li>• Reduced GRE requirements</li> <li>• Independent study programs</li> <li>• Problem-based learning</li> <li>• Accelerated programs</li> <li>• Distance learning, off-campus centers</li> <li>• Collaboration with business to establish programs that are relevant to needs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Online learning</li> <li>• Expanded services/programs for adults</li> <li>• Faculty availability</li> <li>• Smaller classes</li> <li>• Programs specific to adult interests</li> <li>• Accelerated programs</li> <li>• Responsiveness to needs of adult students</li> <li>• Providing adults a social network</li> <li>• Providing adults a place to study, socialize, etc.</li> </ul>



# Practical Applications

- Institutions can help adult learners find more study time by eliminating unnecessary trips to and from campus. For example, a one-hour class that meets three times a week does not just take three hours of time from an adult student's chaotic schedule, but with travel time, dropping kids at child care, etc., can easily take double the time or more than is spent sitting in the classroom
- Creative scheduling and programming:
  - Evening and weekend classes
  - More independent study with the aid of a facilitator, less time in the classroom
  - Accelerated completion programs
  - Once-a-week, three-hour classes
  - Programs such as PACE (Program for Adult College Education):
    - One class per week and independent study
    - Saturday seminars all day once every three or four weeks
    - Research projects, instructional television, educational videotapes, internet programs
    - Block programming around humanities-based curriculum
    - Establishes a learning community and support network by keeping same group of students together throughout the program
    - Facilitates smaller class size, allowing adult students to flourish and not get lost in the crowd



# Practical Applications

- Availability of online and distance learning, satellite campuses, and off-campus centers
- Make academic and financial aid advisors available at times adult learners need them
- Establish a support system for adults in the form of a social network and a physical place to gather, possibly with a place for children
- Online registration
- Online progress tracking (grades, assignments, etc.)
- Online resources (eliminate trips to the library)
- Re-examine general education requirements and give adults credit for life experiences and professional skills
- Encourage problem-based, student-centered programs
- Collaborate with business community to establish specific curriculum
- Provide immediate feedback
- Provide a chance to apply what is learned in a practical setting



# Marketing to Adult Learners



# Treating Adult Learners as Consumers

- The market share of higher education held by adult learners is the fastest growing of all demographics
- Adult education consumers are looking for a solid educational product that will justify the cost
- While institutions need to be mindful of *how* adults learn, when it comes to marketing to them, colleges and universities need to pay careful attention to how adults *want* to learn; wanting versus doing
- “With continuously changing learner demographics and a new generation-type label per decade, it makes good business sense to check in relatively frequently on how learners prefer to learn. Rarely, however, are learners asked about their preferences” (Cohen, 2001)
- As is always true of a good marketing plan, the goal is to tap in to the target market’s attitudes and preferences when building the attributes of a brand
- Margot Frey, director of admissions Notre Dame De Namur University: “Targeting this audience requires a completely different marketing mindset than working with undergraduate students”



# Treating Adult Learners as Consumers

- For institutions, placing a higher focus on the distinctly separate marketing strategies for adult learners not only increases enrollment and retention, it has the potential for exponential recruitment via brand loyalty through their children
- “[R]esearchers agree that the market for adult learners is becoming more competitive, and that institutions seeking to attract adult learners must offer more than simply convenient hours and locations. Encouragement toward degree completion through peer interaction, access to faculty support at convenient hours, and quality of relationships with school administration...could be contributing factors for future success” (Kimmel, McNeese, 2005)
- Adult education consumers are distinct:
  - They are already motivated towards the product (education)
  - They want to envision themselves as successful
  - They want to be at the center of their educational endeavors
  - They want a product (education) that is practical and relevant to their lives
  - They want to be acknowledged as an individual with life experiences and skills
  - They demand user-friendliness if they are to be “repeat consumers”



# Tapping in to the Psychology of Adult Learners

## **Demonstrate the relevance and practicality of education**

- Adult learners don't want to “broaden their horizons,” they want to “focus”; they will respond more to “be a nurse,” or “be a Web designer” than to “be all that you can be”
- Education must be a worthwhile investment of the adult learner's money and time. They will be more motivated as consumers if they know exactly how they will apply their education—the market for the career for which they will be training
- A purposeful and distinctive brand and tagline will aid in recruitment of adult learners
- Show adult students how your program will be practical given the variety of challenges they face in going back to school

## **Recognize the unique identity of adult students**

- Target the adult audience; do not include them as an “aside” in a campaign for students in general
- Acknowledge the value of the adult's life achievements so far; experience is something that happens to children, but experience is who the adult is
- Show adult students in a peer setting—somewhere they belong



# Tapping in to the Psychology of Adult Learners

## Illustrate the student-centeredness of your programs

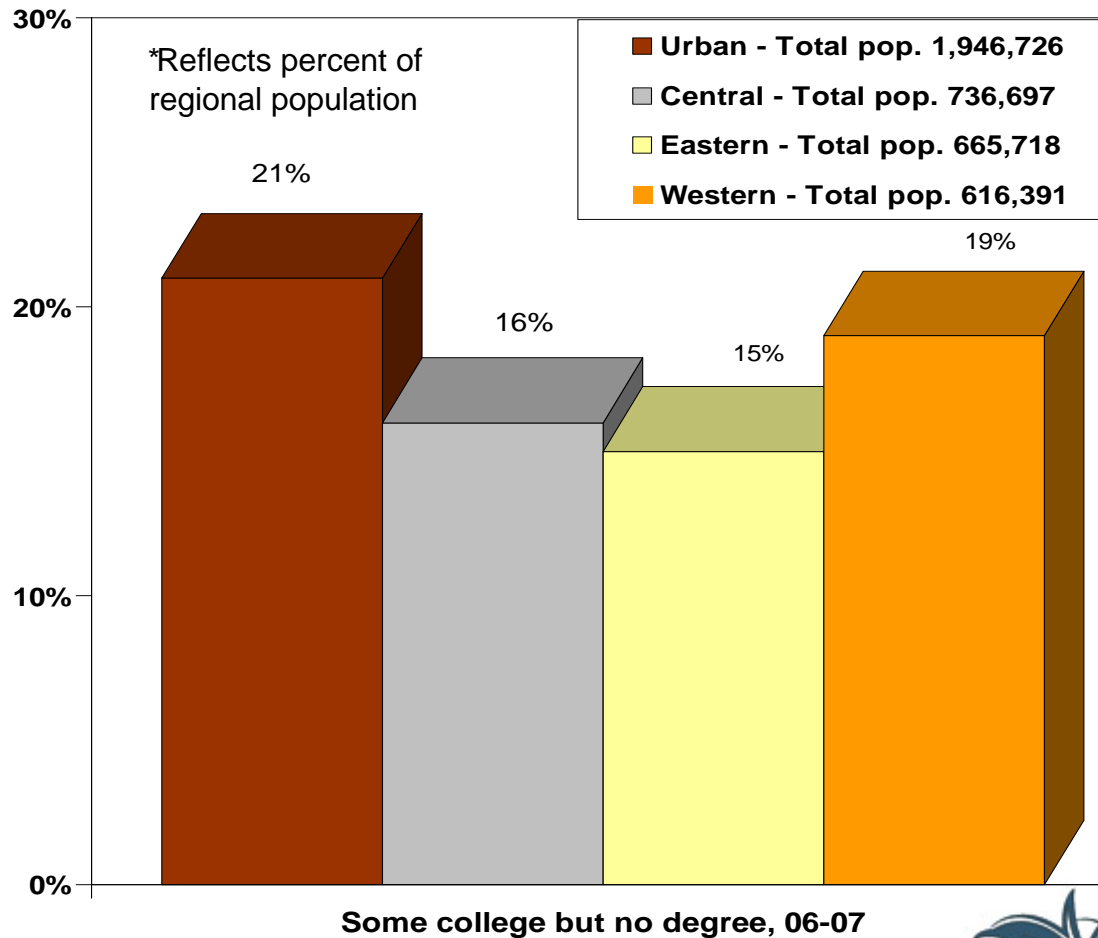
- Remember *Boomers* are used to being the center of the marketing universe. Show them that postsecondary education is not all about the school, not all about the career, not all about society, but all about them
- The motivation is there. Adults are self-directing. Do not regress them as students when as parents, employees, etc. they are used to being in charge of their lives
- A classroom or group scene will make adult learners uncomfortable; an illustration of an adult working independently or with a facilitator/professor will allow them to picture themselves in the scenario
- Show adult learners actually using the education they are considering “buying”



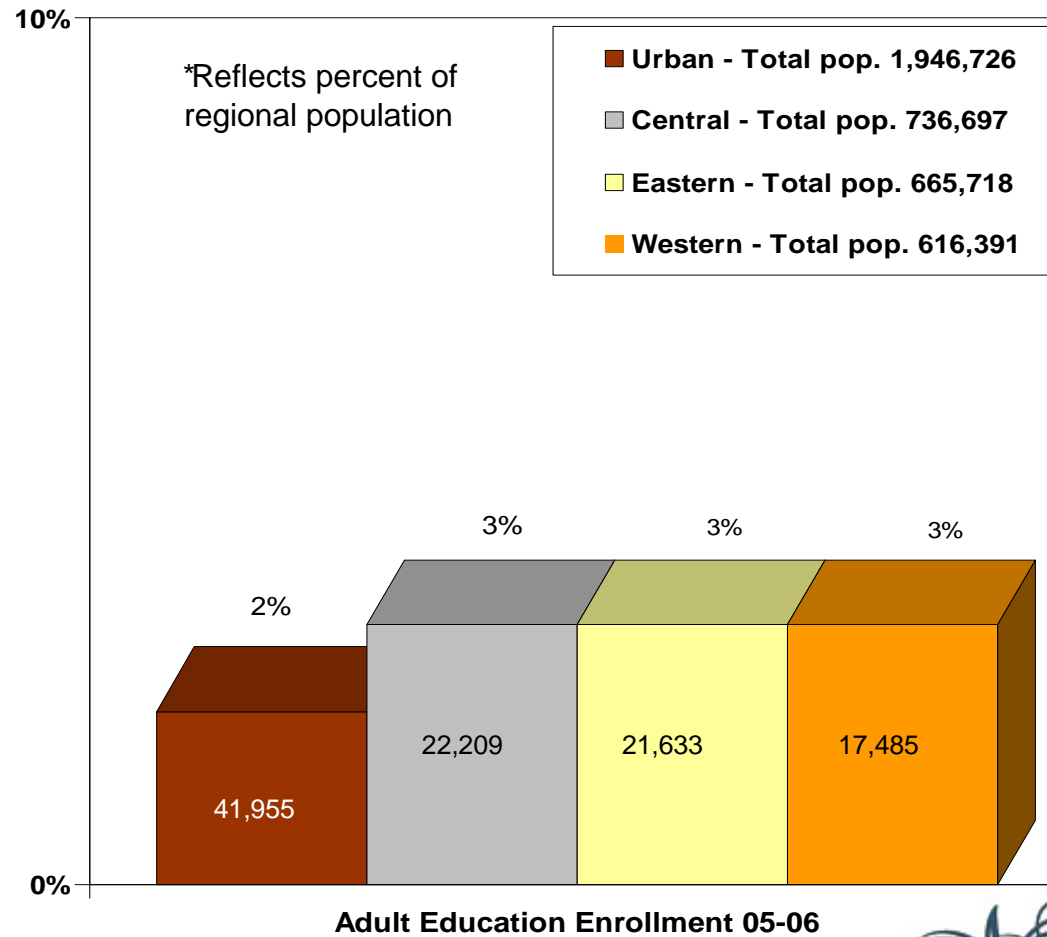
# Adult Education in Kentucky



# Highest Level of Education, 2006-07

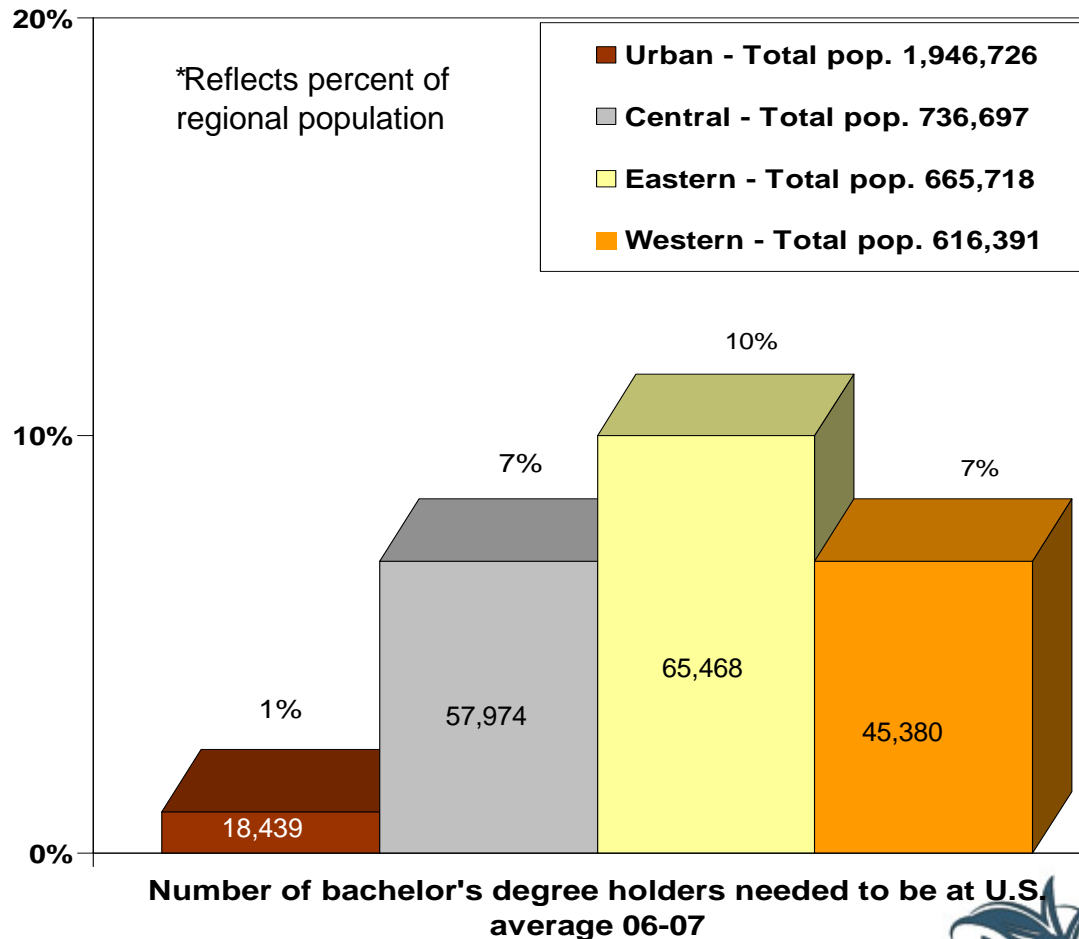


# Adult Education Enrollments, 2005-06



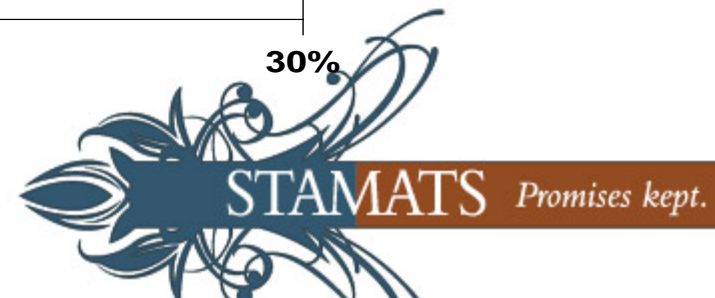
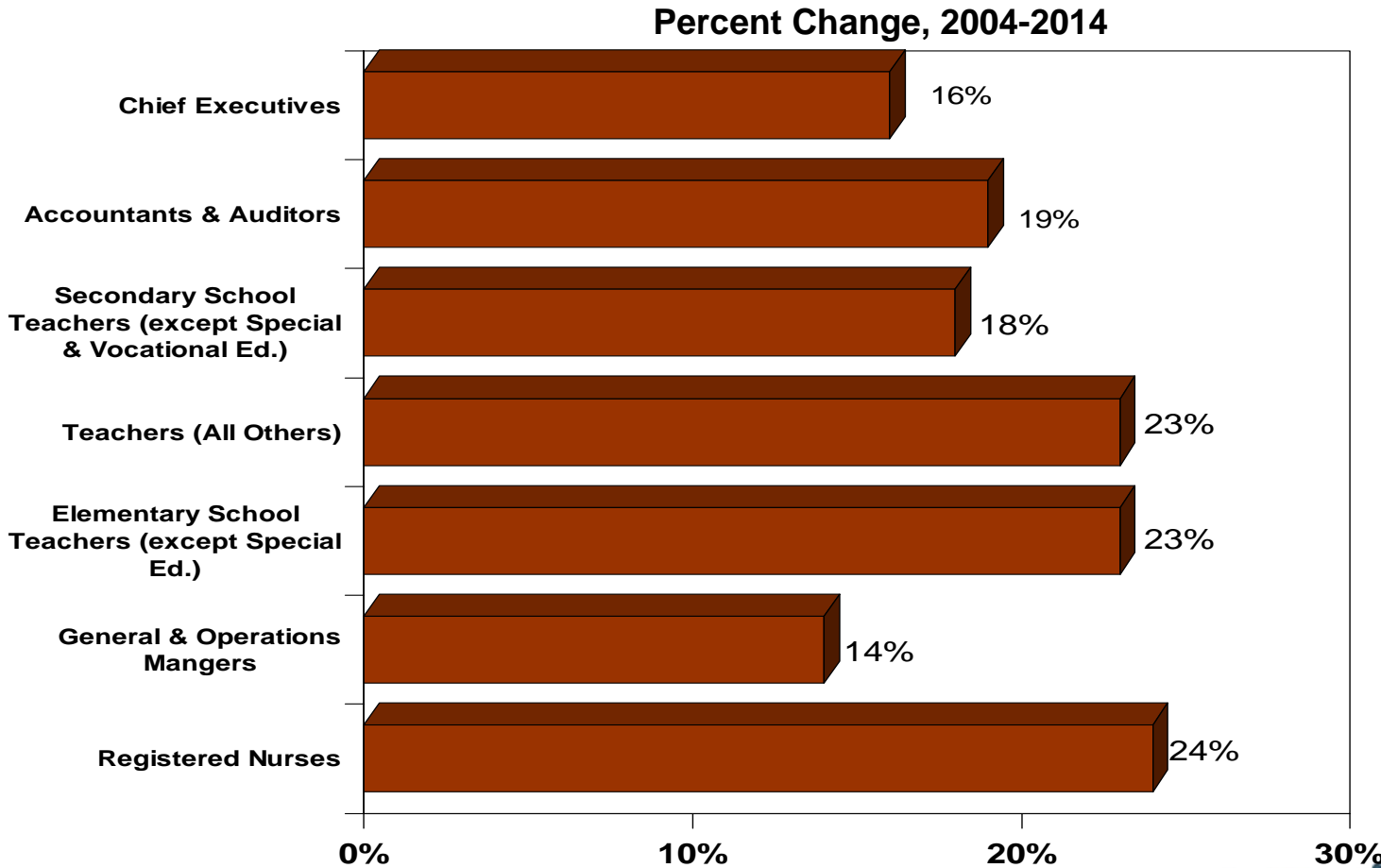
# Bachelor's Degrees in KY

## Compared to National Average, 2006-07



# Top 50 Kentucky Occupations

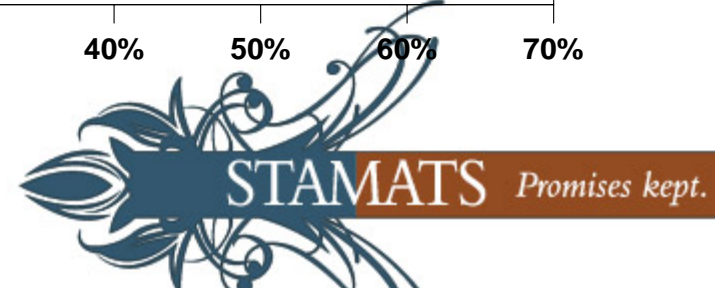
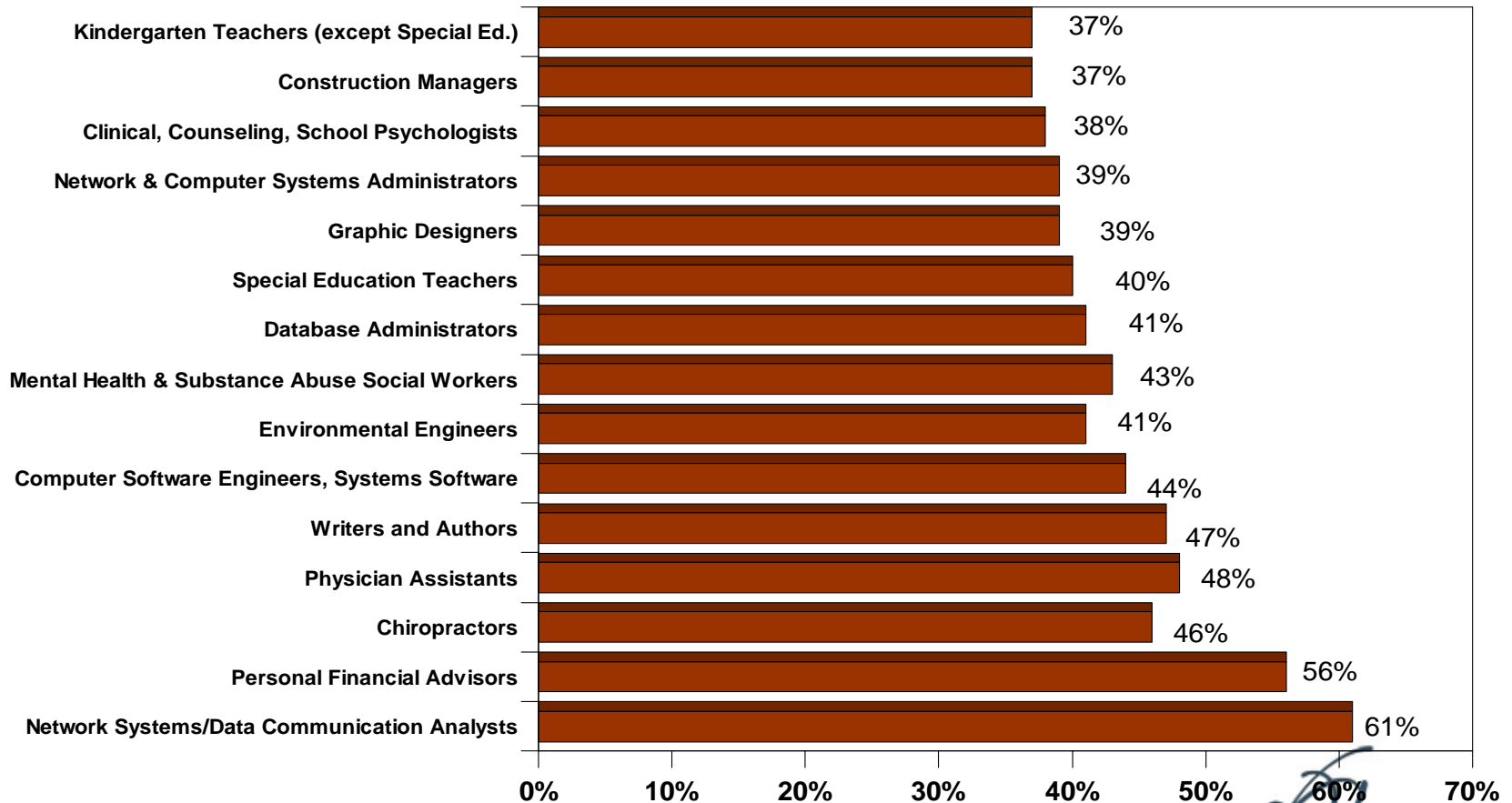
*Ranked by Total Annual Openings Due to Growth and Replacement*



# 15 Fastest Growing Occupations in Kentucky

*Requiring a Bachelor's Degree*

**Percent Change, 2004-2014**



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