

# **BECOMING A STUDENT AT AN ORANGE COUNTY COMMUNITY COLLEGE**

**ONE STUDENT'S JOURNEY FROM INQUIRY  
THROUGH DAY ONE OF CLASS**

**A Secret Shopper Project**

**Funded by  
Regional Strong Workforce**

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## OVERVIEW

In September 2021, the Tennessean published the article, **“Why more adults are going back to college to finish their degrees,”** in which author Hunter Patterson reported that “38% of undergraduates are considered adult learners” and that the “number of adult undergraduates is projected to grow by 21%” by the end of 2022. Whether it’s for career advancement, using work experience to earn college credit, or finishing a degree to set an example for their children, one thing is clear: adult students are becoming a growing part of college campuses and should be a key audience in recruitment strategies.

In order to better evaluate how Orange County’s community colleges can serve adult students, the region conducted a “Secret Shopper” project over a period of 45 days during the spring 2022 semester. The region hired higher education marketing agency Graduate Communications to “secret shop” colleges. A researcher, posing as an adult student, went through the process of becoming a student at four Orange County Community Colleges with the immediate goal of registering in late-start classes. The researcher posed as a student who wanted to enroll in an associate degree at two colleges and a single class at the other two; the area of interest at all four schools was business.

The goal of the Secret Shopper project was to experience the student journey at four Orange County Community Colleges from inquiry to day one of class. The researcher’s persona was an adult with a bachelor’s degree in communications returning to college to sharpen their skills and learn more in-depth information about business.

The project approach was broken down into four phases: Inquiry, Application, Class Registration, and Dropping the Class. The researcher contacted each college and followed instructions – whether received from inquiry replies or via the college’s website – to apply for admissions, completing each step as prompted. Next, our researcher registered for classes, selecting business classes with at least 10 open seats available, so as not to take away an opportunity from another student. Finally, the researcher dropped the class on or before day one.

For each phase, our researcher documented the process and the steps required; took screenshots, documented communications received from the college, including emails, text messages, error messages or roadblocks encountered; documented the time it took to complete the required steps to be ready to enroll in a class; engaged with staff or faculty once contacted and documented the quality of the conversations.

The researcher also completed assessment rubrics for each college that evaluated the colleges’ website information, application process and communication, enrollment instructions and information, and ability to follow up with prospect student inquiries.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Based on our observations, we describe the researcher's experience in detail and provide suggestions for areas in which colleges can improve. In this section, we have outlined overall impressions and provided high-level observations and key takeaways.

## Inquiry Phase

Colleges with the following were more successful in providing students with necessary information and guidance to apply to the college:

- Easy-to-navigate and informative website home pages.
- Business web pages with program specific information and data.
- Easy-to-fill Student Area of Interest forms.
- Personalized and attentive communications.

Colleges that did not respond to contact forms, sent communication using generic forms or general replies, had "Virtual Assistants" that did not provide program specific information, and did not provide a dialog box in contact forms did not fare as well to communicate with students and create a frictionless student journey.

## Application Phase

In the Application Phase, colleges with the following were more helpful in directing students to the next steps of their journey to become a student:

- Had easy-to-find 'Apply Now' links on their website home pages.
- Sent an immediate email or text message to confirm receipt of the application.
- Sent additional information (i.e., a welcome email with next steps after acceptance) after the application was submitted.

Colleges that did not include a post application survey, presented challenges in finding the application link, and did not include the students' identification number in correspondence did not make the application process as easy as those that did.

## Registration Phase

When it came to registering for classes, colleges that used web systems that made it easy to locate classes and included registration links in communications with students made registration easier to navigate and complete. After completing registration, the researcher also found that colleges whose instructors communicated with students prior to the first day of class aided in preparing students for an eight-week class.

Conversely, colleges that included classes from prior semesters in the class search made it challenging to find late-start classes. Also, colleges that used multiple web systems to complete registration and did not send communication to confirm registration success did not do as well to remove ambiguity from the registration process.

## Dropping-the-Class Phase

All four colleges made dropping the class easier than registering. Colleges that did the following excelled more in this stage than those that did not:

- Processed refunds immediately
- Sent confirmation of the drop
- Updated the class status in the student portal to 'dropped'

To improve the withdrawal process, colleges should consider adding a link to the add/drop system in the student portal and emailing a short survey to the student to inquire about their reason(s) for dropping the class.

## OBSERVATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS TO IMPROVE STUDENT JOURNEY

By experiencing the student journey at four Orange County Community Colleges from inquiry through day one of class and documenting the process, this secret shopper project has documented what is working well, identified areas of improvement, and provided recommendations to enhance the student journey.

The inquiry phase is arguably the most important stage for colleges; it's the first impression and opportunity to recruit students. The colleges performed well overall. To enhance the student journey, colleges should reply to all inquiry types with personalized communication when possible and provide specific information on their websites on academic and career programs, instead of generalized information. It is recommended that the colleges ensure website application links are easy to locate, communicate with students via email or text messaging to confirm the application was received, and email post application next steps to students to improve the application process. Late-start, condensed classes are great options for working adults; colleges should make these classes easier to locate through their web systems to help increase enrollment. All four colleges did an excellent job to make dropping a class simple and convenient; emailing a short survey to the student to inquire about their reason(s) for dropping the class will give colleges insight to how they can assist students with these matters and increase student retention.

### Inquiry Phase

During the inquiry phase of the project, our researcher sought to communicate with the colleges via email or online forms, selected a program of study, and sent an interest form to each college requesting more information about a business degree or business classes. The researcher also specifically asked for details about available Spring 2022 late-start, eight-week business classes.

The following inquiry messages were sent:

#### DEGREE SEEKING

Hello! I am an adult professional and want to learn new skills for work. While I do possess a bachelor's in communications studies, I'm looking for a business associates program to sharpen my skillset and get more in-depth with my understanding of business. I am currently interested in taking a single class, and hoping you could tell me what, if any, late start classes are still available for this semester.

Thank you,  
[Name]

## NON-DEGREE SEEKING

Hello! I am an adult professional and want to learn new skills for work. While I do possess a bachelor's in communications studies, I would like to start taking business classes to sharpen my skillset and get more in-depth with my understanding of business. I am currently interested in taking a single class, and hoping you could tell me what, if any, late start classes are still available for this semester.

Thank you,  
[Name]

### What is Being Done Well

- **Site navigation:** Colleges that presented students with relevant and useful information on their website home pages with clearly marked links like "Apply Now, Programs, Class Schedules, and Contact Us" stood out and were easier to navigate than those that did not.
- **Career Education webpages:** Colleges that had informative welcome messages, including what the degree can do for students professionally and data on salary ranges, transfer information, potential careers, etc. did a better job selling the field of study than those that did not.
- **Contact Us/Student Interest Forms:** Colleges that had easy-to-fill contact forms that included only the necessary information, had proactive questions to gauge student interests, and provided and automated communication of receipt, made it simple for students to contact the college and did a better job connecting with students to communicate a genuine interest in the student journey than those without these options.
- **Attentiveness of communications:** Once departments like Counseling, Admissions, or Communications received contact forms and emails, several colleges had representatives respond with personalized communications, which were helpful in guiding and encouraging the researcher.

### Areas to Improve

- **No Reply:** Colleges that did not respond to the contact form or email inquiries lost an opportunity to positively impact a new student's journey.
- **Generic communications:** Some colleges sent form replies and/or course catalogs in response to the researcher's inquiries, rather than answering questions directly. This was frustrating and was not helpful in guiding the researcher toward enrollment.
- **Generic marketing materials:** Colleges with videos on their business program webpages that were general in nature rather than aimed at marketing the specific Career Education program (i.e. business) missed an opportunity to sell the field of study via a video platform.
- **Virtual assistants:** While virtual assistants can be helpful, our researcher found that colleges with this feature were unable to answer specific questions, and were only able to provide general information, rather than program-specific information.
- **Colleges that did not include a dialog or message box in their interest forms for students to further**



explain their interests did provide an opportunity for students that are undecided on a major or area of interest to seek out more information.

## Application Phase

In the Application Phase, the researcher applied for admissions to all four colleges; at two colleges as an adult student interested in a business degree and at the other two looking to take a single class, completing all steps as prompted. Throughout the experience the researcher documented the process.

### What is Being Done Well

- Colleges that made the Apply Now link easy to find and gave students step-by-step instructions on how to apply on their website home pages were successful in guiding the researcher to the admissions application process.
- All colleges sent an instant email message to confirm the success of the CCCApply account creation.
- Colleges that sent an instant email from the Admissions Department or other departments after completion of the application provided extra assurance that the application was processed and was helpful in providing next steps.

### Areas to Improve

- Post-application feedback Survey: One college sent a post-application feedback survey. This survey conveyed to the researcher that the student voice is heard and important to the college.
- Colleges that did not make the application process and/or link easy to find or include step-by-step application instructions did not guide the researcher as well toward successful application submission.
- At times, the CCCApply page was slow to load questions, accept typed answers, and/or move to the next page.

## Class Registration Phase

For the Registration Phase, the researcher enrolled in late-start, eight-week classes when available (one college did not offer a late-start business class). The researcher chose classes with 10 or more empty seats, so as not to impact registration opportunities for students. The researcher documented each stage of registration and completed all steps as prompted.

### What is Being Done Well

- The three colleges that used MyGateway or Canvas online systems made it easier to locate classes and register for classes than the college using WebAdvisor.
- Colleges that included web links to semester class schedules and registration in the application communications made it easier to register for classes.
- Colleges that had departments such as Admissions communicate with the researcher during the registration process helped to remove uncertainty and provided great customer service.



- Colleges in which the professor communicated with students prior to the first day of class did better to welcome, inform, and encourage the researcher than those that did not.

## Areas to Improve

- Colleges that included classes from prior semesters in the online class schedule search made the registration process more confusing. If classes are no longer available to register in, they should be removed from the online search function.
- Colleges that made it difficult to find late-start class availability missed an opportunity to promote short-term classes that could be very appealing to adult learners.
- Colleges that used one system to add a class and another system to complete registration added a level of inconvenience to the enrollment process.
- Colleges without an automated email or text message to confirm registration success added ambiguity to the process.

## Dropping the Class Phase

In the Dropping the Class Phase, the researcher followed the steps required by each college to withdraw from a class and documented the process.

## What is Being Done Well

- Several colleges made dropping the class simple, both in terms of functionality and navigation.
- The only college that required tuition at the time of registration processed the refund immediately and automatically.
- The colleges that sent an immediate and automated email to confirm the class was dropped did a better job to reassure the student the withdrawal was complete than those that did not
- Colleges that updated class status to 'dropped' in the student portal removed ambiguity from the process.

## Areas to Improve

- Colleges should consider adding a link to drop a class in the student class portal to connect students directly to the drop process.
- Colleges should consider adding a survey to inquire why a student drops to see if there are other ways to support a new student.
- Colleges may do well to add a process for counseling or similar departments to reach out to students that drop a class.

## PROJECT SUMMARY

All four Orange County Community Colleges that were “secret shopped” will receive individualized reports. Colleges should continue doing the things they do well and consider focusing on one or two areas of improvement in order to enhance the student journey at their respective institutions. It would be a great benefit to Orange County to extend secret shopping to the remaining colleges in the region.

By evaluating these colleges, we learned that while overall the colleges provide a path for students from inquiry through the first day of class, there are bumps along this path that could provide for a better student journey. These areas, once enhanced, will aide to improve the student journey and should positively impact enrollment and retention, especially for working adults returning to college.