

Adult Learner Program Research Worksheet

Whether looking to advance in their current field, pivot to a new career path, or simply bring more value to the role they're in, working adults want efficient pathways from where they are, to where they want to be.

This brief worksheet will help you ask the right questions and guide your data collection process as you think through program opportunities related to working adult learners. We'll also offer ideas for next steps so you can put your findings into action.

Pre-Work: Setting Parameters

Start by choosing a relevant region and time horizon for your research. **(See appendix for tips.)**

Region: _____ **Time Horizon:** _____

1) Identify growing occupations in your region

Start by getting a general sense for what's going on in your economy. Occupation data helps you do this by offering a standardized way to track trends over time. Collect a few occupations you're interested in and see how they compare across these key metrics.

Occupation	# of Jobs (current year)	% Change (over time horizon)	Typical Entry Level Education	Median Wage

What do I do with this data?

- Assess current program portfolio to gauge high-level alignment between existing programs and these broad career areas.
- Choose one “occupation of interest” to focus on for further analysis.
- Use the data to guide your regional comparisons in the next section.

2) Do a quick regional comparison

Focusing on your occupation of interest from Step 1, see how your region compares to others or how subregions (e.g. cities within your state) compare to each other. The goal is to uncover comparative advantages and pinpoint labor market hot spots.

Comparison Region	# of Jobs (current year)	% Change (over time horizon)	Median Wage

What do I do with this data?

- If your region is a hot spot, start to think of ways you can leverage this information in recruitment, marketing, and advising — not just program development.
- If you discover other regions with more growth, explore ways to reach those markets (offering distance programs, opening satellite campuses, hosting career fairs in that city, etc.).
- Use the data to guide more in-depth job posting analysis in the next section.

3) Zoom in on promising job roles

Using your occupation research as a guide, you can now zoom in on relevant job postings to get more detailed, real-time insight into specific employer needs within your region.

Occupation of Interest: _____ (from previous section)

What are the top titles being advertised in employer job postings?

What are the top companies posting for these jobs?

Job Titles

Company Name

What do I do with this data?

- Use the list of top employers to inform industry partnerships. Are these companies represented on your advisory boards? Do you have internship or experiential learning programs with them?
- Enable career services to share this data with current students looking to understand internship and career opportunities in your region.
- Equip enrollment marketing teams to share this data with prospective students who need evidence of market demand for the education you provide.
- Use it to guide more in-depth skill analysis in the next section.

4) Assess in-demand skills

From those same job postings, you can now glean the specific skills employers are looking for and see how they align with your course content. Remember to look at both hard, technical skills (coding languages, medical procedures, etc.) and human skills, aka soft skills (characteristics and abilities that transcend a specialized domain). Employers consistently say that they value both!

Hard Skills	Currently Taught?

Human Skills (aka Soft Skills)	Currently Taught?

What do I do with this data?

- Use skill insights to assess curriculum. Are you currently teaching these skills? In which courses and programs?
- Use to inform marketing. Do you communicate these skills on your program pages? Do learners know these skills are both in-demand AND taught at your institution?
- Share this insight with learners: Do they understand the unique skill requirements for different jobs? Do they know what courses will help them develop and demonstrate those skills?
- Use it to guide more in-depth skill gap analysis in the next section.

5) Assess the current supply of working professionals (i.e. prospective students)

Using data from online profiles and resumes, you can assess the current state of workers in your occupation of interest (Who do they work for? What skills do they already have?). These working professionals represent a key pool of prospective students for any programs you offer that provide pathways to upskilling or career advancement.

Top Cities

Top Employers

Top Job Titles

Top Skills

What do I do with this data?

- Use locations to inform delivery modality and marketing plans. Do you have campuses near the supply hot spots? Are you focusing digital ad spend in those regions?
- Are working professionals concentrated within a certain company or companies? If so, you may consider reaching out to these employers to offer upskilling and reskilling for their current workforce.
- Use to inform gap analysis, as outlined below.

6) Perform gap analysis

Now that you have all your data together, you can start comparing labor market supply against labor market demand. Here are some areas to focus on:

Compare overall worker supply with employer demand:

- Are there more profiles than job postings? If so, there may be an opportunity to create programs that help professionals stand out from the crowd and advance in a competitive job market.
- Are there more postings than profiles? If so, there may be an opportunity to recruit workers from other occupations and industries if you can showcase the strong employer demand in your region and offer an efficient pathway to qualify for those jobs.

Compare in-demand job titles with top job titles of working professionals:

- Where there is overlap between job titles, you may have an opportunity to provide upskilling pathways to help already employed workers advance in their field.
- Where there is disconnect (more people working in job A, more employer demand for job B) there may be opportunities to offer reskilling that helps people shift into more in-demand specialties within the same broad occupation category.

Compare in-demand skills with top skills of working professionals:

- Are there skills that are more prevalent in job postings than they are in professional profiles? If so, this may represent a "skill gap" in the current workforce that you can address with targeted credentials and programs.
- Where skill demand is high but is met or exceeded by skill supply that doesn't mean students shouldn't learn those skills, but it does mean they may need to differentiate themselves in other ways to stand out.

Compare in-demand skills with skills taught in your curriculum:

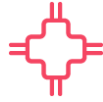
- Explore ways to repackage existing courses into shorter, career-aligned credentials that deliver high-value combinations of in-demand skills for adults looking to upskill or reskill.
- Where in-demand skills are missing from the curriculum, engage faculty and employer partners to explore solutions. Consider expanding existing courses, developing new ones, or establishing internship opportunities to supplement classroom learning. You can also look for related skills that are taught in existing courses to serve as a starting place for curriculum development decisions.

About Lightcast

Lightcast's mission in higher education is to provide data and analytics that help colleges and universities:



Optimize
program offerings



Connect
students to programs
& careers



Communicate
outcomes & impacts

If you'd like an easy way to get the kind of information outlined in this worksheet, here's two tools you may be interested in:

Analyst: Lightcast's user-friendly platform for comprehensive labor market analytics. With Analyst, you can easily collect all the data outlined in this worksheet, and do it in minutes rather than hours. [Watch an example of how Analyst can be used to research program opportunities for adult learners.](#)

Skillabi: A tool for surfacing actionable curriculum insights, powered by skills data. Skillabi makes it easy to see how the skills you teach align to the skills employers want. [Watch an example of Skillabi in action.](#)

Appendix: Tips on Setting Parameters

Region: The relevant region for market analysis will depend on your institution type (community college, university), service region / typical service region as well as intended program modality. If you're considering offering the program online, then a national or at least state-wide analysis would make the most sense. If it's on-campus only, then you may want to focus on only the surrounding counties or the closest metropolitan area. If time and resources permit, you can always research both (national and local) and use that to inform the modality.

Time Horizon: There is no "right" answer. Longer time frames (10 years) are good for identifying strong, persistent trends that have proven resilient to short-term economic shocks (geo-political events, natural disasters, etc.). Shorter time frames (1-2 years) can be more relevant to identify rapidly growing / emerging job areas that are just now beginning to take off. A medium time horizon (5 years) can be a good compromise between these two emphases.

Typical Ed Level: To focus your research, you may want to limit your analysis to occupations that typically require the level of education your institution offers (associates, bachelors, etc.). The US Bureau of Labor Statistics provides [typical entry level education](#) for all occupations, but only at the national level. In other words, this data does not account for regional nuances, let alone the hiring practices of individual employers. So, while BLS data gives a useful overview of typical entry-level education requirements, it's best to supplement that by looking at the requested education specified in local employer job postings as well.