

Adult Learners



Quick Reference Guide

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What is an adult learner?

Adult learners are students who take classes but are outside the ages of 18 to 25 years old. These students may also be called “non-traditional” students, mature students, or returning students. This contrasts from “traditional” students, who attend college shortly after high school.

Columbia data shows that the average age of our students is 26. Other surveys across the US estimate that around [40% of US undergraduate students](#) aren’t “traditional” students. Adult learners have their own set of needs and are fully supported by staff at Columbia Health. This guide discusses some of the resources available to support them during their time at the University.



Are there providers on campus that can support me?

Yes! Columbia Health has staff and providers with a variety of backgrounds and expertise. This includes helping folks navigate a return to the classroom, family planning, balancing multiple priorities, and supporting spouses’ and partners’ health needs.

If you want to meet with a provider with relevant experience to your needs, you can [contact the department](#) directly to request a specific provider. Students can [review provider biographies](#) on the Columbia Health website by logging in with their UNI and password.

I've had the same provider for years. Can I keep seeing them?

This depends on your enrollment in the Columbia Student Health Insurance Plan, also referred to as “The Columbia Plan”



Students on the Columbia Plan must use the on-campus Medical Services as their primary care provider.

For any other type of provider, you'll want to do two things:

1. Get a referral from Columbia Health.
 - a. Medical Services can give you a referral for all types of specialist medical care.
 - b. Counseling & Psychological Services can make referrals for off-campus mental health support, including psychiatry.
2. Ask your current off-campus provider if they accept the insurance plan and are considered in-network.



Students not on the Columbia Plan have the option to transfer care on campus or keep seeing their existing providers.

Even if you chose to continue with care off campus, Columbia Health can assist with a variety of health needs, especially if you can't reach your off-campus providers. You may want to meet with Columbia Health if:

- You feel sick or have a flare up of a chronic health condition on or around campus.
- You're running low on a medication and can't get in contact with your off-campus provider.
- You have a health concern specific to your role as a student, such as struggling to concentrate in class or difficulty physically navigating campus.

I haven't been in a classroom in a while. How can I adjust?

Being back in the classroom can be a shock, especially for people used to a traditional 9 to 5 schedule. Here are some general tips:

- Meet with your academic or faculty advisor to discuss your concerns and get their advice on being successful in your program. They may be able to connect you to other adult learners who can share their experience!
- Try to create a clear distinction between classes and work/other responsibilities (to the extent possible!). Schedule separate time blocks for coursework and other responsibilities.
- Utilize faculty office hours or academic support services (Writing Center or tutoring) to build up a toolkit.

Students interested in support with returning to the classroom can schedule an appointment with a [Wellness Coach](#) through Alice! Health Promotion or [meet with a provider](#) in Counseling & Psychological Services.

How can I contribute to the University as an adult learner?

Your non-traditional journey adds value to our campus community!

- In classes, you may be able to contribute detailed and practical examples of different course content. This can deepen the discussion with faculty and help your peers to apply theoretical concepts to real-world situations.
- Your perspective can also help administrative offices like financial aid, student life, or student engagement to better support adult learners, student parents, or part-time students.

Even with a busy schedule outside the University, there are opportunities to engage with the campus community. This might include attending professional development events during protected academic lunch blocks, serving as a student ambassador or peer mentor, or engaging with your school's student life office.

Wondering about the difference between coaching and mental health support? Schedule a [Health Promotion Appointment](#) or call Alice! Health Promotion at (212) 854-5453.

I feel like everyone is much younger than me. Where can I connect with other peers?

There are a variety of student organizations, professional associations, and other groups on campus that can support adult learners. Here are some general tips to find your community here at Columbia:

- Check with your academic advisor or School's Student Life office if there are recognized organizations or specific events for adult learners.
- Many student organizations are open to students across the University. Some may be open to students outside the host school! Check out organizations in the [School of General Studies](#), the [School of Professional Studies](#), or the [Graduate School of Arts & Sciences](#).
- University Life maintains a [calendar of events](#) on campus, including those specific to graduate students. They also run the [Graduate Initiative](#) to build community across graduate and professional programs.
- If your employer is supporting your studies, consider checking with your HR representative if there are other current employees pursuing a degree, even if they're not at Columbia!



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