



Degree Attainment for Adult Learners

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The Challenge

The economic future of the U.S. is inextricably linked to the capabilities of its work force. By 2018, 63 percent of all jobs will require some postsecondary education. Currently less than half the workforce holds an associate degree or higher level of education, creating a gap that calls for an additional 3 million credentialed workers (Carnevale, Smith, and Strohl, 2010).

This gap cannot be closed by increasing the stream of high school graduates. Programs intended to expand the pool of college-ready youth will have some effect but will not come close to achieving workforce needs. The largest available population able to benefit from postsecondary education to meet these needs is the existing workforce and adults seeking to enter or re-enter the workplace (Hoffman and Reind, 2011).

Achieving the projected target of 3 million additional credentialed workers requires broadened access for working adults through flexible, accelerated delivery models and new services tailored to adult learners that support their persistence to goal attainment. Postsecondary education leaders that will be most successful, and have been most successful in meeting this need, have redefined institutional relationships with adult learners, focusing on program delivery and support services to meet the needs of working adults with multiple and competing responsibilities.

Many postsecondary institutions have responded to these needs with a variety of successful programs, many of which are led and managed by continuing and professional education units with a mission to serve the needs of adult learners. These units may have their own degree granting authority, or, they may be hybrid models providing delivery in off-campus, online, hybrid, or evening and weekend formats, with academic departments retaining responsibility for program quality and instructional delivery.

Even as adult learners have reached majority status in postsecondary education, a gap remains between educational attainment and workforce demands. Achieving dramatic increases in enrollment and academic success require institutional commitment to adult learners' needs in both undergraduate and graduate strategic enrollment planning, tuition and financial aid policy, and student support services for those served off-campus and online as well as on-campus or in the workplace. To meet these challenges, institutions must create and sustain a learner-centered culture, build a strategic enrollment framework, and implement strategies and programs that support progress to degree. Reaching outside their institutions to establish productive collaborative efforts with partners that share common goals, the higher education community can break through traditional barriers to create new approaches to achieving and validating learning outcomes.

Establishing a Learner-Centered Culture

What does it take to support the educational advancement of adult students? Adult learners benefit when the institution is focused on the learner, prides itself in teaching excellence, and strives to ensure that appropriate support services are available and tailored to the needs of the student demographic served.

In order to advance an adult learner-centered focus within postsecondary institutions it is important to have a well-articulated statement of philosophy that embraces all learners. For adult learners, that includes flexibility, accelerated schedules, compressed classes, acceleration to degree, and affordability. Such elements ultimately benefit all learners, although their demographic characteristics may differ. Within each of these dimensions, postsecondary communities have opportunities to develop an action agenda aimed at fulfilling degree

attainment goals for adult students while advancing concepts and approaches to the implementation of a learner-centered culture.

Access is a major factor influencing adults to pursue postsecondary education. Historically, adult learners have enjoyed expanded access through the establishment of evening colleges, continuing education programs and more recently, online learning. While these have had a major impact on student enrollments, they have not gone far enough in meeting the ongoing learning needs of adults, nor have they fulfilled workplace demands. In part their growth has been stymied by restrictive policies, faculty resistance, or insufficient incentives for faculty to extend their work to include off-campus and online teaching to reach new audiences.

Access and flexibility have been enhanced through scheduling of courses to meet degree requirements and the needs of adults. More than two-thirds of adult learners are part-time students taking one or two courses per term (Pusser, Breneman, Gansneder, Kohl, Levin, Milam, and Turner, 2007). Of those who are considered full-time students, many are also employed full-time. Flexibility in scheduling of time and structure of offerings is of particular importance to these students. Many institutions are moving to shorter terms that redefine the traditional two-semester-plus-summer-session model, with research demonstrating that shorter times to completion result in higher completion rates and lower overall cost to students (Diaz and Cartnal, 2006). Most recently, competency-based course and program design at institutions such as Western Governors University and Northern Arizona University offer another kind of flexibility: Students master competencies and progress at their own pace (Smith, 2012).

Innovations in online learning and the management systems that have been developed to support distance education have addressed a number of adult student issues, most notably access and flexibility. Online learning has pioneered and demonstrated, for example, the value of virtual

learning communities. These communities actively engage students in learning processes with group activities and student dialogue, contributing to networking and relationship building critical to student persistence (Angelino and Natvig, 2009). Concerns about instructional quality and student support have led to innovative approaches to engage online learners and provide expanded access to learning resources, orientation, advisement, and other support services.

Persistence is often measured by retention rates in the same manner that traditional student rates are measured, but retention rates alone do not give a full picture of adult student participation. A range of variables affect persistence, and understanding and managing these variables requires accommodations that challenge traditional practice. Removing obstacles to access, for example, enhances adult learners' persistence (Kazis, Callahan, Davidson, McLeod, Bosworth, Choltz, and Hoops, 2007). Adult learners often "stop out" of degree programs. New delivery models where students pursue degrees in accelerated semesters, year-round as a cohort, have provided flexibility that meet their needs.

The relationship the institution develops with the learner is an increasingly important factor in student success. The transferability of credit, for example, places a value on previous education and experience and defines student status. Students who find they have to go backward to go forward because the credit previously earned is not transferable often start out frustrated and tend to disengage rather than persist. Penn State University's analysis of its 2005 adult applicant survey, designed to learn why admitted adults either did not accept the offer or accepted the offer but did not enroll, showed a number of participants were concerned about taking courses that duplicated learning they had previously gained in the workplace.

Respondents believed that redundant coursework would increase the cost of their education and the time it would take them to complete their degree.¹

Degree attainment is a key measure of **success**, yet there are other milestones that are critical to note, including time to degree, progression benchmarks, successful applications of learning, and standardized measures such as passage rates on licensing examinations. In a learner-centered institution, success is not only a measure of student ability but also institutional responses to student needs. Institutions that embrace a learner-centered philosophy focus on the student and the student's progress to degree. Integrating the adult into the core operations of the university can be addressed through approaches such as one-stop centers, as well as deliberate efforts aimed at creating inclusive learning environments for all learners.

Widener University, using the Adult Learning Focused Institution (ALFI) Assessment Toolkit, developed by the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL), identified a need for a campus-wide "one-stop" student services center to more effectively advise adult learners. Despite efforts to offer a flexible schedule and a variety of course options, students, who had a tendency to "self-advise," believed they had limited choices. They were frustrated by the array of entry points into the university and the lack of a single place that could answer all of their questions, from admission and financial aid to degree programs and course locations. Consolidating these resources saves adults time and effort. For example, providing financial aid information alongside program offerings helped prospects see the feasibility of going back to school and assisted them in constructing strategies for degree attainment (Richardson & Frey, 2005).

¹ *Best practices for attracting and retaining undergraduate adult learners*. Pennsylvania State University January/February 2005. <http://www.psu.edu/president/cqi/newsletter/news82.pdf>

With nearly half its student population age 23 and older, Guilford College, in Greensboro, North Carolina, is another example of an institution developing strategic priorities to address the unique needs of adult learners within an integrated culture (Stripling, 2010). Its Gateway to Success Program, a grant-funded initiative supported by the Council of Independent Colleges and the Walmart Foundation, offers a one credit course focused on building a framework for success for first generation students. Guilford has addressed the need for a customized orientation for adults that focuses on writing skills, and has expanded its mentoring support services. Such efforts are paying off: Persistence for adult learners from one semester to the next was 86 percent, as compared with 93 percent for traditional students. Interestingly, more than a quarter (27 percent) of adult students had a GPA between 3.0 and 3.5, compared with 21 percent for traditional students.²

Deliberate attention to the adult learner fosters and supports inclusivity in a student-centered culture. It is in this context that many of the strategies intended to advance student progress to degree are able to take root.

Strategic Enrollment Management: Creating Meaningful Pathways

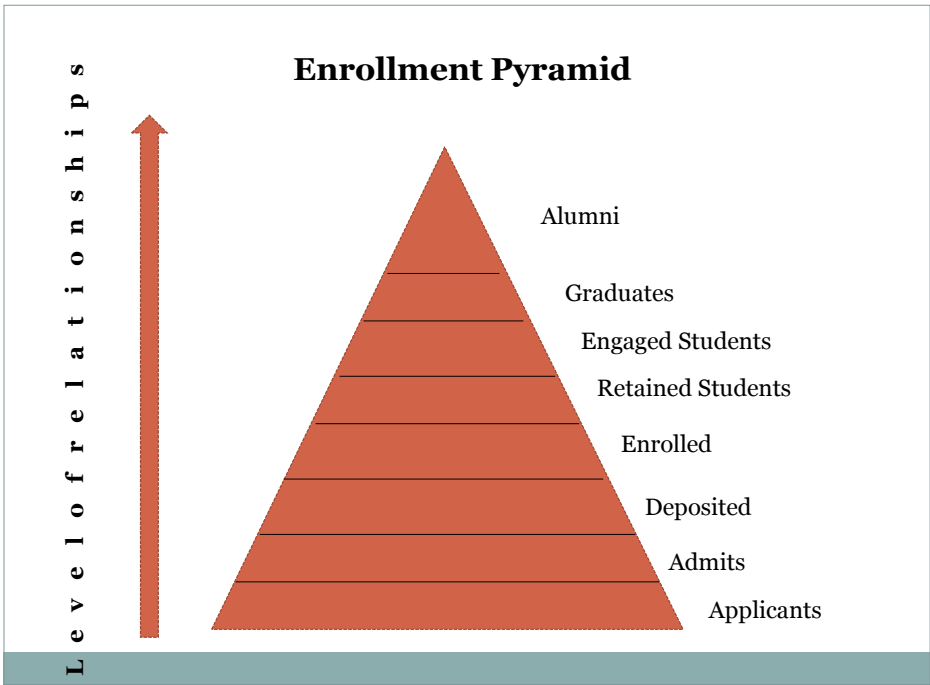
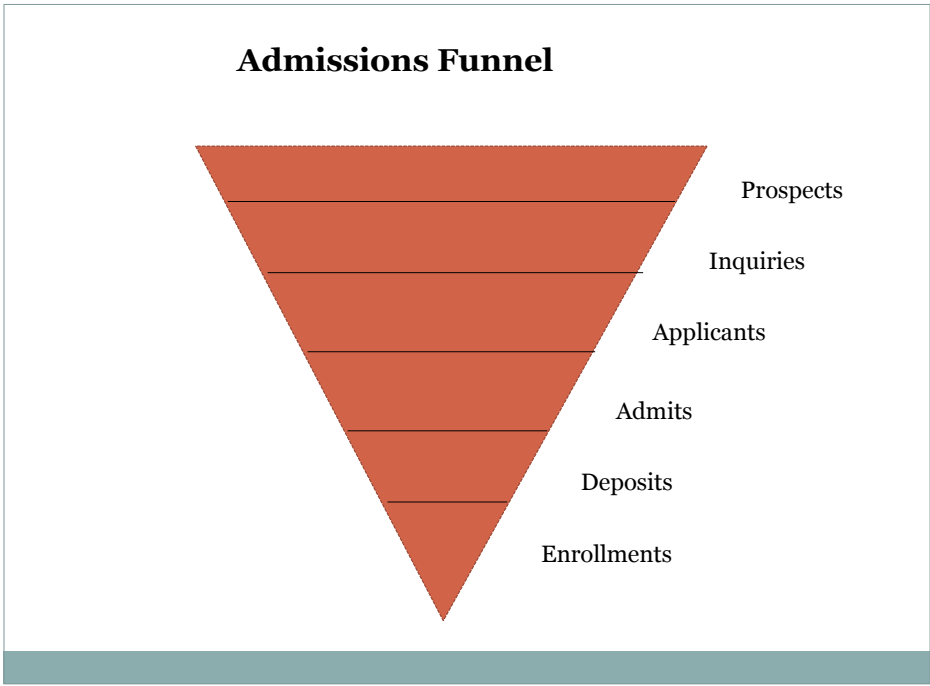
Bringing the adult student to the core of enrollment strategy in postsecondary education is essential if higher education institutions are to meet enrollment expectations on a limited budget. The integration of adult students in a learner-centered environment illuminates traditional barriers and opens dialogue on how best to serve the needs of these learners. Strategic enrollment management (SEM) offers one approach to meeting these needs while supporting integration.

² "Annual Report", 2012. <http://www.guilford.edu>

Enrollment management in higher education is maturing into a highly sophisticated management strategy driven by economics, as well as an increased demand for measurable accountability.

SEM as a component of strategic planning is goal-oriented and designed to integrate academic and administrative functions as shared responsibilities (Bontrager, 2004). Applying the principles of SEM with a learner-centered focus establishes a culture of engagement that intentionally addresses the goals of access, persistence, and success.

SEM in effect tips the admission funnel upside down as it focuses on relationship building from prospect to degree attainment. It is an integrated approach that typically includes marketing and recruitment, admissions and financial aid, student support services, and retention management, as well as academic services. Decentralized, fragmented management gives way to comprehensive, institution-wide strategies that integrate roles and functions, bridging academic and administrative structures with a common philosophy and goal-centered, learner-centric approaches. In addition, SEM is metrics driven and therefore able to provide data sets specific to adult students.



The quality of relationships characterizes the SEM model, reflecting the partnership between the student and the university. The emphasis on relationship building as a shared

responsibility results in a learner-centered culture. When students have positive relationships with faculty mentors and staff advocates, they are more likely to succeed (Flint, 2005). Academic advisors serve as the linchpin to an integrated approach and play a primary role in student success. The Oklahoma State University System, an early pioneer in enrollment management, illustrates the shift to a team approach in fostering student success. Focusing its initial efforts on quality improvement strategies to reduce waste and decrease transaction times, the Oklahoma System expanded the role of enrollment management from an admissions function to an institutional strategy that blended academic and administrative roles and functions. This served to create a sense of “team”, encouraged collaborative review and the redefining of processes, while fostering deliberate rather than reactive approaches to student support issues, and built a data-rich environment to support institutional decision-making.

As a result, Oklahoma has had a steady increase in enrollments since 2007, with 89 percent of its graduates remaining in the state’s workforce upon degree completion. Singled out as a national model by Complete College America (CCA) in 2011, the State has set a goal of increasing the number of degrees and certificates earned annually from 30,500 to 50,900 by 2023, a 67 percent increase.³ Oklahoma’s emerging success underscores the capacity of a strategic enrollment approach to transform institutional practices aimed at achieving enrollment, persistence, and attainment goals.

Strategic Enrollment Management provides a vehicle for measuring adult learners’ retention and degree completion rates, identifying the key causes of attrition, and evaluating the effectiveness of initiatives focused on increasing adult learners’ access, persistence, and attainment. A recent survey of higher education institutions of all types underscores the longstanding need to provide a comprehensive framework for measuring adult learners’

³ “Annual Report”, 2011. <http://www.okhighered.org>

completion rates: 77 per cent of the respondents do not know graduation rates for their adult students. Only 16 per cent reported that they have a good understanding of the key reasons for these learners not completing credentials.⁴ With such significant gaps in data, higher education institutions, policy makers, and state systems are likely to make uninformed decisions that negatively impact both access and attainment.

Supporting Progress to Degree

Student progress requirements pose a number of challenges unique to the adult student. Readiness, credit standing, flexibility, and financial need are key factors that limit adult progress to degree. Persistence, time to degree, and measurable success can be greatly enhanced with focused attention to these needs.

Many adult learners come to college with high expectations but may not be college ready. Often they are confounded by difficulties navigating institutional policies and procedures and do not know where to turn for help.

These and other factors impact time to degree. For students who lack the skills needed for academic success, developmental education programs can provide valuable pathways to success. For learners in transition who have earned college credit or who have credit worthy experience, their standing regarding credit transfer is important in establishing time to degree. Degree plans that outline course requirements, schedules, and options help students navigate a path to degree attainment. Educational financing options may expand or limit access and progress to degree.

Developmental Education

The rate of progress to degree from traditional developmental programs has historically been very low. Almost 60 percent of students entering the nation's community colleges require

⁴ *Measuring nontraditional student success: An imperative for colleges and universities, 2012.*
http://www.insidetrack.com/images/accordion/UPCEA_and_InsideTrack_White_Paper_Measuring_Success.pdf

some form of remediation. Only about 15 percent of these students continue on to college-level work in one year and still fewer complete a postsecondary credential (Smith, 2011).

State and national data on the high costs of remediation and low rate of student success have focused attention on the reengineering of remedial education, with many states building data systems to track the number and percentage of developmental students that transition to college courses and earn a postsecondary credential (Price and Roberts, 2009). As an incentive to successful completion, some states are increasing reimbursement rates for community colleges to offer wrap-around support services along with revamped instructional practices that integrate literacy and career training. More states are moving toward performance-based funding incentives linking the successful transition of students in developmental education courses to credential attainment (Smith, 2011).

Adults participating in Washington State’s Integrated Basic Education Skills Training (I-BEST) initiative, which provides college credit for courses focused on both literacy skills and career knowledge, are more likely to persist and earn college credit than those learners in traditional adult basic literacy and ESL programs.⁵ Programs that have adapted the I-BEST model demonstrate similar outcomes, such as Minnesota’s FastTRAC, a modular program that provides incremental credentialing or “stacking” and allows students to stop out and return without incurring entry delays or processing barriers. Eighty-eight percent of the participants completed the integrated courses compared to 25 percent in traditional courses.⁶

These programs help adults gain the knowledge and skills sought by employers while earning transferable college-level credits. Programs are “mapped” within career specific fields, giving students a clear understanding of where they are going and how to get there. The

⁵ “Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training (I-Best), 2012. <http://www.sbctc.ctc.edu>

⁶ “Update”, 2012. <http://www.mnfasttrac.org/docs>

credentialing is progressive so students can “stack” credentials and build their competence in a career field or advance to a degree.

Time to Degree: Credit Transfer

The amount of credit awarded has a direct impact on time to degree and costs incurred by transfer students. Many states have established guidelines for credit transfer built on 2+2 degree completion models, articulating coursework in associate degree programs to requirements for the first two years of a bachelor’s degree. Strategies include the establishment of a common general education core among community colleges, guaranteed transfer of associate degrees into related four-year programs, reverse transfer models from four-year institutions to community colleges to award associate degrees, dual admissions programs, articulation agreements, common course numbering, and statewide catalogs offering “course audit” capabilities (Johnson, 2011). These efforts have streamlined the transition for community college students to four-year colleges and universities.

For many adults, however, these strategies do not go far enough. Adult students who do not follow a 2+2 model frequently encounter difficulties receiving transfer credit. Their credits are often from institutions outside the state and thus do not conform to a 2+2 transition program. They may face other obstacles including time limits on courses completed or changes to programs of study, such as an increase in credits required for the degree. In many instances, a student may have completed general education requirements at the first institution only to find the transfer institution unwilling to recognize those core courses.

More than half of students working toward a bachelor’s degree have attended more than one institution and have difficulty transferring credit (Michelau, 2011), requiring them to repeat courses or take courses similar to those denied credit, resulting in longer time to degree. For

decades, institutions have struggled to identify course equivalencies across institutions, leading to a tendency to restrict transfer credit.

While state policymakers have made strides in creating guidelines for transition of community college students, adult learners with a range of educational experiences often suffer from the lack of comprehensive transfer policies and practices. Strategies that mitigate adult learners' loss of academic credit recognize satisfactory completion of transitional courses prior to award of credit, review years of relevant work experience, and evaluate competencies for course equivalencies. Additional performance measures, based on clearly articulated learner outcomes, are frequently used in professional track programs for individuals transitioning from one program or program level to another. Tyler Junior College, in Tyler, Texas, for example, provides an additional 19 credits for licensed vocational nurses entering associate programs after satisfactorily completing two transitional courses.⁷

Recently, Indiana passed legislation to streamline degree credit requirements, making it easier for students to transfer between colleges. According to Gov. Mitch Daniels, "At a time when higher education has never been more important, earning a college degree is taking Hoosiers too long, costing them too much, and leading far too many to pile up debt with no degree. Indiana took an essential step toward reversing these trends with student-centered legislation to make it easier for more Hoosiers to realize the promise of a college degree".⁸ Kentucky, Florida, and Oregon have also addressed these concerns and, with the national focus on both affordability and completion rates, more states are likely follow in the near future.

Time to Degree: Credit for Prior Learning

⁷ Tyler Junior College, School of Nursing and Health Sciences/ <http://www.tjc.edu/nhp/>.

⁸ "Press Release", Governor signs bills to limit 'credit creep', other higher education measures; May 16, 2012. <http://www.in.gov/>.

Learning gained from experiences outside postsecondary education often merits academic credit. Prior learning assessments (PLA) provide a range of options from recognition of military and workforce training to national examinations and portfolio development. The credit worthiness of these experiences is rigorously assessed by national organizations such as the American Council on Education (ACE), The College Board, and the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL). Students granted PLA credit show increased graduation rates, greater persistence, and shorter time to degree across age, ethnicity, and institutional type (Klein-Collins, 2010; Moulder, Abdulla, and Morgan, 2005). PLA eases the return to college by connecting adult learners' college-level competencies gained through workplace training and experiences with academic degree programs.

Recent research (Klein-Collins, 2010) also shows that regardless of institution size, institution type, student demographics, or financial aid status, PLA students had significantly better graduation rates than non-PLA participants. Fifty-six percent of PLA students earned a postsecondary degree within seven years, compared to 21 percent of non-PLA students who did so. Additionally, PLA students saved between 2.5 and 10.1 months in time to a bachelor's degree compared to learners that did not participate in PLA. Similarly, students earning an associate's degree saved from 1.5 to 4.5 months compared to non-PLA students.

Yet PLAs are not widely integrated into institutional policies and practices of most two- and four-year institutions. More widespread practice requires greater awareness, acceptance, and application of PLA options, beginning with nationally-recognized standards for the evaluation of extra-institutional learning. Increasing faculty engagement is key, coupled with strong support from senior leadership, as programs are most successful when faculty and advisors actively advocate for them (CAEL, 2011).

Growing numbers of higher education systems are beginning to explore, develop, and implement more comprehensive PLA policies and practices. In 2007, Minnesota passed legislation calling for an articulated system of education, training, and professional development that includes prior learning and the development of equivalencies to two- and four-year institutions.⁹ More recently, Colorado called for the development of institutional policy regarding credit for prior learning and Kentucky set forth requirements for prior learning assessment as part of its Adult Learner Degree Attainment Initiative.¹⁰ As with mandates for 2+2 articulation agreements, recent initiatives and proposed legislation on PLA offer the higher education community both challenges and opportunities. Leading innovative efforts in utilizing PLAs while maintaining institutional autonomy and program quality and integrity are institutions such as Ivy Tech Community College of Indiana, Rio Salado Community College in Arizona, SUNY Empire State College in New York, Excelsior College, also in New York, and Union Institute and University in Ohio.

Degree Mapping: Pathway to Degree Attainment

Structured degree pathways tailored to the needs of the student are critical to student persistence and success (Augusta, Cota, Jayaran, and Laboisser, 2010). A career pathway sets forth a road map of how students can navigate pre-college and college-level courses. These pathways allow adults to access credit guaranteed to count towards a credential or degree. A degree map gives context to a degree program plan and serves as a blueprint for the student's educational journey thus increasing the odds of successful degree attainment.

⁹ <http://www.mnscu.edu/board/policy/335.html>

¹⁰ [http://www.leg.state.co.us/clics/clics2012a/csl.nsf/billcontainers/845EEEEE117B030387257981007E03A0/\\$FILE/HB1072_00.pdf](http://www.leg.state.co.us/clics/clics2012a/csl.nsf/billcontainers/845EEEEE117B030387257981007E03A0/$FILE/HB1072_00.pdf) ; http://cpe.ky.gov/nr/rdonlyres/4aad0846-9ea1-402c-b9bd-32f7fdc95e9f/0/8_kyadultlearnerinitiative.pdf

Many institutions have transformed their advisement strategy to include degree mapping or planning, providing sequential term-to-term outlines of course loads, course availability, delivery modes, and PLA options. The accelerated cohort models of delivery, in face-to-face and online formats, include the degree map as part of the delivery design. The degree map serves as a touch-point for follow-on advising, course registration, and program management.

One longstanding degree map model is provided for active service members, veterans, and family members through the Servicemembers Opportunity Colleges (SOC), a member organization of 1,900 colleges and universities supporting voluntary education within the armed services. The degree plan provides a profile of course requirements and the options open to the service members to complete those requirements, such as military schools, Military Occupational Specialties, transfer courses, national examinations, and online learning. The SOC agreement serves as a “contract-for-degree” between the home college and the student, guaranteeing that the home college will award the degree to the student once all stated requirements have been met. SOC aggregates data from the agreements to track trends and support tuition assistance funding needs while institutions use the agreements to define individual degree plans and support student progress to degree completion (Brown and Gross, 2011).

Active duty service members at Central Texas College (CTC), for example, may apply for a SOC agreement after completing six semester hours of credits and request an evaluation of their military training experience. Institutions with programs such as CTC’s minimize loss of credit and avoid duplication of credit while maintaining program integrity. CTC has extended the concept of the SOC agreement to all transfer students with the implementation of the Individual Career Evaluation Process (ICEP), recognizing extra-institutional learning experiences and

awarding academic credit as appropriate. Through these processes students may transfer as many as 49 credits toward their associate degrees.¹¹

Financing Education: Limitations to Progress

The cost of postsecondary education has continued to increase, placing a significant long-term burden on students. Financial aid is a key factor in student persistence and ultimate success. This is particularly true of adult students, many of whom pay as they go or are dependent on Pell grants or loans, with scholarships and grants representing a small percentage of their funding sources.

Many adults can only go to school because their employers provide tuition reimbursement. Employers, recognizing the importance of education for retention and advancement of their work force, have funded tuition assistance programs for their workers. In 2007, 68 percent provided reimbursement for undergraduate programs, and 65 percent for graduate course work.¹² Workers receiving these benefits tended to be white adults who were employed in professional or managerial occupations for a large employer. Most restrict the total amount spent per year per employee, and many require that courses be work-related or that students earn a grade of B or better.

The global depression of 2008 and declines in profit in recent years have forced some employers to greatly reduce or eliminate tuition assistance program.¹³ Since 2007, there has been a yearly decline in tuition reimbursement of about two percent. By 2011, 58 percent of organizations were offering undergraduate assistance and 54 percent for graduate assistance.

¹¹ Central Texas College, Alternative Credit Sources. http://ctcd.edu/student/alt_credit_sources.htm

¹² 2011 Employers benefits: Examining benefits amidst uncertainty, Society for Human Resources Management, http://www.shrm.org/Research/SurveyFindings/Articles/Documents/2011_Emp_Benefits_Report.pdf.

¹³ HR News, accessed May, 6 2012, <http://shrm.org/publications>.

Efforts to find sources for financing postsecondary education call for creative and collaborative approaches across sectors. Postsecondary institutions concerned about increasing costs of education are beginning to explore alternative financing options. Juniata College in Pennsylvania has established a “guaranteed graduation” program that promise students will complete their degree in four years.¹⁴ Students must declare their majors early, meet with their academic advisers every semester, take a certain number of credits, and pass their classes. If students get to the end of their program and courses are unavailable, the cost for courses beyond the four years is on the institution. Recent graduation rates indicate that between 92 percent and 96 percent of the students completed their degree in four years. Programs such as Juniata’s are designed for the full-time student; modifying the program to support part-time study would offer opportunities for boosting adult learners’ degree completion.

A few state and local governments have begun to partner with employers to offer Lifelong Individual Learning Accounts (LiLA)—portable, matched accounts similar to 401Ks that are funded by individual contributions, employer matches, and third-party contributions and used for education and training purposes. The Maine Department of Labor, for example, is providing LiLAs through its network of career centers and partnering with Maine’s NextGen 529 college investing plan.¹⁵

Pilot program outcomes show that nearly half the recipients had not considered enrolling in courses before hearing of the program. Fifty-two percent of participants completed at least one course. Most took courses that were for career advancement or enhanced workplace knowledge and skills. All participants found the assistance of career advisors to be highly valuable. Wage

¹⁴ Juniata College, 2012-13 Catalog.

<http://www.juniata.edu/services/catalog/section.html?s1=appr&s2=graduationguarantee>

¹⁵ State of Maine Career Center.

<http://www.maine.gov/labor/careerctr/services-programs/training/lila/about/index.shtml>.

gains, retention, and employer satisfaction with the participant group were noted. At the federal level, legislation has been proposed to create a tax credit for contributions made by employees similar to credit for 529 plans. The proposal would also allow small businesses a federal tax credit for program start-up costs (CAEL, 2011).

In the best of times, adult learners, especially those with lower level skills and low wage jobs, have faced multiple obstacles in finding funds to obtain a postsecondary credential. Today's political and economic climate, where a college degree is often viewed as a "private good" in which the individual learner must invest, intensifies the difficulties, as well as the need for thoughtful leadership, creative collaboration, and cross-sector coordination to find solutions. Strategic approaches must incorporate ongoing support for transitioning adults, including pathways for those learners with GED® credentials, alternatives for traditional developmental education coursework, accelerated program formats, more robust credit transfer policy, increased financial aid options, and greater acceptance of prior learning assessment—especially workforce and military training with ACE credit recommendations published in online guides and accessible to higher education institutions nationwide.

Getting Ahead of the Curve: Where Do We Go from Here?

In order to remain competitive in the global economy, the United States will need to create incentives and support for greater collaboration between employers, employees, and educational institutions. Individually, postsecondary institutions can go a long way toward improving adult learners' degree attainment by intentionally including them in strategic enrollment management plans and identifying support service delivery as an essential expansion of institutional operations. Getting ahead of the curve, however, requires new ways of thinking and doing and the strength of well-organized collaborations.

Many states, alarmed about the skill level gaps of their people, are increasingly calling for action and accountability. Kentucky, one of the first states to target adults with some college credit but no degree, established Project Graduate in 2007 to find and serve adults with 90 or more credits by providing free applications, priority enrollment status, access to individualized academic advising, and financial aid counseling.¹⁶ By fall 2011, 492 students in the program completed their degree and an additional 898 students were enrolled.¹⁷

Similarly, Oregon's 40-40-20 Goal seeks to have 40 percent of its residents attain a bachelor's or higher degree, 40 percent an associate degree, and 20 percent a high school diploma by 2025. To achieve the goal, Oregon established regional career pathways that focus on student transitions within defined programs of study. Linking education and training in mapped programs that guide students to earning a credential in a high demand job sector in their region, 17 community colleges currently provide 150 programs, drawing funding from multiple sources including the Federal Perkins Loan Program, Workforce Investment Act Titles I and II, and Temporary Assistance to Needy Families. Some 650,000 working adults are targeted for this program. In 2011, 100,000 students were enrolled in the Oregon University System. With 20,000 degrees produced annually, the state is on track to reach its 40-40-20 Goal by 2025 pending continued funding and support from the state.¹⁸

Probably the most successful effort by postsecondary institutions to expand enrollment has been online education (Dunn 2000). Adults are the predominant population served by online education, although recent studies are showing wider acceptance of online learning. Aslanian and Clinefelter's recent report, *Online College Students 2012*, found that 40 percent of online

¹⁶ *Crossing the finish line: A national effort address near completion*, Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2011. [http://www.ihep.org/assets/files/publications/a-f/\(Brief\)_Crossing_the_Line-Near_Completion.pdf](http://www.ihep.org/assets/files/publications/a-f/(Brief)_Crossing_the_Line-Near_Completion.pdf)

¹⁷ "Update", 2012. <http://www.cpe.ky.org/doc>

¹⁸ "Symposium Report, 2012". <http://www.ous.edu/partner/404020>.

students are now younger than age 30 and one out of five are younger than 25 years of age. What began as an alternative delivery system for courses has evolved into a comprehensive education system providing undergraduate and graduate degree programs in modules that are highly responsive to the needs of adult learners. While enrollments have grown dramatically in less than a decade—from fewer than 1 in 10 in 2002 to close to one-third by 2010, with the number of online students growing from 1.6 million to over 6.1 million over the same period—faculty acceptance has increased much more slowly. Attitudes among faculty remain conflicted, especially at large public institutions, underscoring the need for early engagement and investment in professional development.¹⁹

Online education offers great potential to meet the needs of learners of all ages and offers solutions to institutional challenges of balancing the demands of growing enrollments with limited budgets. Blended learning designs coupled with lecture capture technologies provide solutions to meeting learner needs for access, flexibility, and course choice while scaling instructional capacity. Students can access the courses they need at a time that works best for them, choosing to attend class or participate online.

An interesting model that has permitted scaling online instruction in a hybrid format has been developed by San Francisco State University. Their HyFlex instructional model uses lecture capture technology with blended online/classroom instruction. Faculty control the integration of video lectures in their course. The instructional model has been adapted for use in all disciplines and is widely used for survey courses with enrollments of 300 or more as well as smaller classes of 20-40 students. The HyFlex design is hybrid, combining online and face-to-face teaching and learning activities, and flexible, providing students the choice to attend face-to-face instruction.

¹⁹ *Conflicted: Faculty and online education, 2012.* <http://www.insidehighered.com/news/survey/conflicted-faculty-and-online-education-2012>.

A key benefit for the university is that it can serve both onsite and online students without maintaining a self-contained online degree program. Students engage in generative activities that reinforce learning and contribute to reduced attrition and fewer repeated courses. Maximizing the use of limited resources, the HyFlex model has gained wide acceptance among faculty and students and is seen as achieving the best of both in-class and online instruction.²⁰

Meanwhile, investments in educational technology by venture capitalists have tripled in the past decade (DeSantis, 2012), with the emergence of entrepreneurial companies such as Coursera and Udacity likely to raise the bar on services, decrease costs to the learner, bring about innovation in online learning experiences, and push the boundaries of traditional, cross-sector partnerships. In addition to Coursera's development of free, online courses, or MOOC's (Massive Open Online Courses), Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and Harvard established edX, bringing other major universities, such as University of California Berkeley, into the rapidly growing stable of institutions offering MOOC's. With millions of eager lifelong learners across the globe signing up, organizations are beginning to explore options for participants to test their competence and earn a certificate for a modest fee. Mozilla's Open Badges Initiative, edX and Coursera's MOOC's, and other emerging projects highlight alternative systems for learning as well as the need for new avenues for credentialing (Soares, 2012). Challenging our current notions about content, assessment, teacher-learner relationships, and learner to learner interactions, MOOCs represent a new frontier and broaden paths for learning.

Conclusion

²⁰ 9th Annual Sloan Consortium, 2012. <http://sloanconsortium.org/conference/2012/blended/hyflex-course-design-meeting-educational-needs-courses-flex-bend-without-bre>.

Higher education leaders, policy makers, and business CEOs know that the U.S. goals of significantly increasing postsecondary attainment will not be met by continuing to focus on 17- to 21-year-olds, and as a result, are embracing new cohorts of learners—military veterans, GED achievers, displaced workers, and incumbent workers whose skills no longer match the needs of an increasingly sophisticated workplace. While systematic approaches and model programs to bring underserved populations into postsecondary programs across institutions, states, and regions, none of them are at sufficient scale to address the enormity of the task before us: Out of 59 million adults with no postsecondary education, 32 million do not make a living wage. There is also an enormous potential for education attainment for the 20 percent of the adult population with some college credit.²¹ With the magnitude and immediacy of the problem, higher education leaders cannot afford to follow an incremental path toward these goals, but rather must be bold in creating new pathways and becoming advocates in adult learning and attainment efforts at multiple levels.

Developing a comprehensive adult learning and attainment agenda is the next critical step in the nation’s push toward greater postsecondary achievement, as well as the next critical step in ACE’s long-time commitment to adult learners. ACE invites presidents and chancellors and their teams to support the development of a comprehensive and successful adult learning and attainment agenda by engaging in the following actions:

1. **Lead institutional efforts to scan your “home environment.”** Identify adult learner groups your institution is serving and assess current policies, practices, and gaps in the programs and services provided.

²¹ *Adult learning in focus: National and state-by-state data*. CAEL and NCHEMS 2008. http://www.cael.org/pdfs/StateIndicators_Executive_Summary

2. **Build on strategic priorities that focus on adult learning and attainment.**

Make this focus an integral part of your institution's mission, scope, and role, promoting the benefits of doing so for learners across all age groups.

3. **Invest in the faculty champions of an adult learning and attainment agenda.**

Develop, incentivize, and expand faculty peer networks that lead and engage in innovation in areas such as online learning, prior learning assessments, and competency-based education.

4. **Develop the leadership pipeline with adult learners in mind.** Make adult learning and education attainment a key component of professional development for emerging leaders at your institution.

5. **Highlight the work you are doing with adult learners.** Implement, expand, and sustain good policy and practice in adult learning and attainment in collaboration and coordination with organizations such as ACE, CAEL, and The College Board, as well as with the business community, state legislatures, and accrediting bodies.

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