Executive Summary of the Adult Learner Literature: Definitions, Trends, Benefits and Responses

"Although 'traditional' 18-22 year-old full-time undergraduate students residing on campus account for only 16% of higher education enrollments, the attention given to this group of students obscures the fact that the vast majority of college and university students are 'nontraditional' largely working adults struggling to balance jobs, families, and education."

- Peter J. Stokes

Definitions – Defining the Adult Learner

The term "adult learner" is a contemporary term for a population of students historically identified as "non-traditional". Many involved in working to support adult learners find the term "non-traditional" problematic. To identify adult learners as "non-traditional" supports a misconception that non-traditional students are a permanent student minority sub-population, while the data show that the adult learner population is on the rise and on its way to becoming the majority college student population.

There are varying definitions of adult learner. Each definition is based in the identification of particular characteristics. For instance, a study by Choy (2002) cites a widely accepted broader definition of "non-traditional" students that includes students who:

- Delay their entry to college by at least one year following high school; or,
- Have dependents; or,
- Are single parents; or,
- Are employed full time; or,
- Are financially independent; or,
- Plan to attend part time.
- Begin their journey not having a high school diploma.

The NIU P-20 Adult Learner Subcommittee currently uses the Penn State (2015) definition of adult learner. It is a comprehensive and inclusive definition. In addition, the elements of the Penn State definition lead to clear, traceable and readily accessible data points for statistical tracking – a weakness of some alternative definitions.

The Penn State definition describes the adult learner as a student who is:

- 24 years of age or older; or,
- A veteran or actively serving member of the armed services; or,
- Returning to school after four or more years of employment, homemaking, or other activity; or,
- Assuming multiple adult roles, such as parent, spouse/partner, employee, and student.

It should be noted that the Penn State definition requires that learners meet only one of the bulleted items to be considered an adult learner. The P20 Adult Learner Committee use this definition for the purpose of a focused discourse, although some member institutions’ definitions of adult learner vary in elements, such as the age range of the adult learner.

Trends – Statistics on the Growth of the Adult Learner Population

The following widely cited statistics share indicators of the current and future growth of the adult learner population.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2002, 2009):

- Between 2000 and 2011, the enrollment of students under age 25 increased by 35 percent (35%), while enrollments of students 25 and over rose 41 percent (41%) during the same period.
▪ Thirty-eight percent (38%) of the 2007 enrollment of more than eighteen million college students were twenty-five years of age or older.
▪ Of the adult student population, 57 percent are married, 53 percent support more than one dependent, 29 percent are single parents between the age of 30 and 40, and 39 percent worked full time.

A study by to Hussar and Bailey (2009) indicates that:
▪ Projections of higher education enrollment from 2007–2018 suggest that the number of students over twenty-five will remain stable or increase during the current decades, while students making a direct transition to college from high school to college will decrease over the same time period.

The 8th edition of a study by the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE, 2015) indicates that a high-school graduate cohort classes experienced a period growth that started around 1990, but this growth peaked in 2011. The WICHE study further indicates that:
▪ Declines in enrollment of traditional students are coming;
▪ Declines will vary by region and Illinois is located in a region expected to experience a 5 to 15 percent (5-15%) decline in traditional students enrollment until the next potential percentage increase.
▪ The next possible period of sustained growth of traditional students is not expected until 2020-21.
▪ Adult learners over age 24 currently comprise about 44 percent (44%) of U.S. postsecondary students, but many millions more need postsecondary credentials to succeed economically.

These statistics reveal that any future plans or strategies for higher education that do not address the needs of the adult learner risk alienating a majority of their potential students.

Benefits – Why it Pays to Support Adult Learners

Supporting adult learners will require effort and resources, but the data shows that resources expended to support adult learners are resources well spent. Data indicating the sheer numbers of potential students who can be considered adult learners provides the largest and most obvious incentive to target adult learners. However, sheer numbers of students is not the only benefit of supporting an adult learner population. Research conducted by the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL, 2010) demonstrates that in comparison to traditional students, adult learners:
▪ Are more persistent;
▪ Have higher graduation rates;
▪ Have a decreased time to degree completion;
▪ Take more courses.

In addition, in systems that both serve adult learners and award credit for prior learning have:
▪ Student degree completion rates 2.5 times that of traditional students;
▪ Minority degree completion rates 8 times higher than that of traditional minority students.

The combination of the raw numbers of potential adult learners in the general population and the supporting evidence that these students actually persist, take more courses and graduate all indicate that this group needs to be considered in planning for marketing, course and program development, and student services. The following section provides specific details regarding support for the adult learner.

Responses: Providing Systematic Support for Adult Learners

A 2012 report by the Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance identified three forms of barriers faced by adult learners attempting to pursue higher education. The barriers are:
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- Situational: Conditions at a given time that limit the student's ability to access and pursue higher education (i.e. cost and lack of time).
- Institutional: Practices and procedures that may discourage or exclude students from pursuing postsecondary education (i.e. problems with scheduling or transportation, course relevance).
- Dispositional: Student perceptions of their ability to access and complete learning activities (i.e. negative past experiences, self-doubt, doubts about fitting in with a younger crowd).

The term Adult Learner Friendly (ALFI) Institution (CAEL, 2010, p.17) identifies a collection of policies and procedures that make an institution more accessible to adult learners. Examples of these policies that are widely cited in the literature include:

- Special outreach to adults;
- Career advising;
- Educational advising;
- Student services offered in the evening;
- Student services offered on weekends;
- Courses offered in the evening;
- Courses offered on weekends;
- Flexible course schedules;
- Accelerated course options;
- Child care;
- Online and other distance learning opportunities;
- Financial assistance for part-time learners;
- Ability to drop out and reenroll in same course without penalty due to unforeseen emergencies;
- Use of individual learning plans;
- Veteran/military support services;

It is noteworthy that many of these services are currently available at most institutions (i.e. educational advising, career advising), but it is not enough to offer these services. Theses services need to be offered in a manner that considers the special circumstances faced by the adult learner. The following section provides more detailed examples of interventions to make higher education accessible for adult learners.

In a well-researched and well-documented report, the AACRAO Consulting Group (2008) identified potential institutional responses to these barriers:

- Payment Plans:
  - Discuss at the Beginning;
  - Establish a flexible payment infrastructure - Adult learners fund their education through a variety of methods (out-of-pocket, GI bill, employer reimbursement plans);
  - Establish grants and scholarships for the adult learner;

- Ease Transfer Credit Process
  - There is a large population of individuals who have earned credits and will return or not return to their education based upon the ease/difficulty of having their credits evaluated and accepted or rejected.
  - This process should be clear and easy to navigate.

- Offer Credit for Prior Learning
  - Use industry recognized certifications (i.e. CLEP, DANTES);
  - Find alternative methods to award prior learning (i.e. portfolios);

- Offer Evening, Weekend Courses;

- Make Learning Relevant
  - Connect Faculty and Curriculum to the Workplace
  - Consider the adult learners professional needs during advisement.
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- Offer Adult Learner Friendly Career Counseling Services
  - Extend services to include transitional services (i.e. resume development, interview skills);
  - Develop relationships with community employers/sponsor job fairs;
- Offer Orientation and Community Building
  - Reduce the anxiety and feelings of isolation by providing opportunities to join a community;
  - Provide personal contacts between advisors and adult learners.
- Adopt Flexible Leave Policies;
- Include Nontraditionals in the University Mission;
- Offer Courses Online.

Conclusion

Statistics on the adult learner indicate an enormous pool of potential students. In the region encompassing Northern Illinois University there are 3,500,000 residents over 24 years of age with some college, but no degree. In addition, once these students enroll they statistically raise graduation rates, take more courses, and complete in shorter amounts of time. Our commercial competitors have taken notice and are actively pursuing adult learners. However, Northern Illinois University, unlike our competitors in the region, has a solid “brick and mortar” reputation that will allow us to successfully compete against those with larger marketing budgets, but who lack our reputation in the community. As stated previously in this paper, shifting focus to accommodate adult learners is a challenge and will require resources. However, given the details supplied in this summary, it is hard to imagine that resources expended to reach this audience will not yield increased enrollment and provide a more mature and diverse student population.

References

AACRAO Consulting (2008) Changing demographics: Why nontraditional students should matter to enrollment managers and what they can do to attract them,” SEM Source.


National Center for Education Statistics (2009) Digest of Educational Statistics 2009. Table 192. Total fall enrollment in degree-granting institutions by control and type of institution, age, and

