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Adult Learner Considerations in Admissions and Enrollment

By: Tammy R. Johnson and Sonja G. Cantrell

Background

As national focus on retention and student success increases, many states and institutions are looking for ways to increase the number of students who ultimately earn degrees. Many are realizing that the non-traditional adult student population is a historically untapped demographic that can provide almost instant, positive changes in graduation rates. This group is often considered low-hanging fruit and can be targeted to quickly complete unfinished degrees. This is especially true for institutions that have a large number of non-completers with high numbers of earned hours. Many non-returners have 90 or more earned hours and simply need some encouragement and proper guidance to start down the path to degree completion.

In West Virginia, as in many other states, institutions have recently increased their focus on student retention and success. One of the outcomes of this increased focus was the creation in 2011 of the statewide *DegreeNow* program to encourage degree completion by adults with previously earned college credit. *DegreeNow* is aimed at non-traditional students who have a significant amount of earned college credit—typically 90 or more semester hours—and who therefore can complete their degrees with minimal time and effort. To facilitate the success of *DegreeNow*, the West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission partnered with Dr. Marguerite M. Culp and the National Association of Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education (NASPA) to create the *Leveraging DegreeNow* training project. Sponsored by a grant from the Lumina Foundation, the project focuses on teaching theoretical frameworks that support adult learners; strengthening partnerships between academic affairs and student affairs; creating a culture of evidence in student affairs; and identifying other ways to assist adult learners during their college experience.&

The *Leveraging DegreeNow* project is based on principles developed by The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) and seeks to provide broad, usable information for professionals in higher education settings who wish to assist adult learners. Although the project's holistic approach covers most facets of higher education, its principles can be applied to specific offices and functions, including the admission and initial enrollment process for returning students. Information about the needs of adult learners in their role as students abounds; however, information about their needs during admission (or readmission) and throughout the early stages of the enrollment process is limited. Using the CAEL principles as a guide, this article describes ways to improve the experience of adult learners as it relates to the admission and enrollment process.

Most institutions likely already implement some—but not all—of the accommodations for adult students described below. Not all of the suggested initiatives will be beneficial to every campus, and readers are encouraged to consider carefully which may be applicable to their campuses and to adopt only those that are appropriate. Many of the following proposed actions are geared toward adult students, who are affected disproportionately by certain issues, but most of the suggestions will benefit all students, traditional and non-traditional alike. Many of the

suggestions may seem to be simple common sense. Nevertheless, institutions that primarily serve traditional students often fail to consider the admission and enrollment process from the perspective of the non-traditional student.

CAEL Principles

CAEL (2000) developed and published a set of guidelines for use by higher education professionals who wish to facilitate the success of adult and non-traditional learners. These guidelines are as follows:

- Assess learning outcomes
 - Measure each student's current knowledge, skills, and competencies
 - Recognize and give credit for life experiences
- Assist with financing
 - Provide an array of payment options
 - Offer a variety of financial assistance packages
 - Help learners develop strategies for locating external funding
- Create intelligent and appropriate support
 - Develop comprehensive academic and student support systems that address the life circumstances of adult learners
 - Build these systems on up-to-date adult learner research and theories
 - Connect adult learners to these services in pro-active, stage-appropriate ways
- Focus on teaching and learning
 - Use multiple methods of instruction
 - Incorporate experiential and problem solving approaches
 - Help students see the relationship between the curriculum and useful knowledge and skills
 - Help everyone in the college community to understand their role in the learning process
- Offer life/career planning assistance
 - Use realistic assessment strategies
 - Focus on career development theories and strategies that apply to adult learners
 - Help learners make data-based educational decisions
 - Engage students as active partners in planning, delivering, and evaluating learning
- Reach out to adult learners
 - Assess their support service needs
 - Address these needs in ways that work for adults
 - Assist students to identify and overcome barriers that prevent them from returning to college
 - Assist the institution to overcome barriers of time, place, and tradition that prevent adult learners from returning to –and succeeding in—college

- Help adult learners to identify and deal with their fears and concerns about returning to college
- Regard the outreach principle as a license to innovate
- Build strategic partnerships that support lifelong learning
 - With adult learners
 - Between academic and student affairs
 - With community organizations
 - With employers
 - With unions
- Assess adult learners' comfort level with technology
 - Build on the skills they have
 - Help them acquire the skills they need
- Use technology intelligently to:
 - Expand the choices for learning
 - Bridge geographical barriers to learning
 - Provide timely and flexible support services (CAEL 2000).

Applying CAEL principles to admission and initial enrollment functions

Although CAEL principles are meant to inform the overall academic experience of the student, they also can be applied to the admission and enrollment process for adult and non-traditional students. Little information exists specific to best practices in admissions and enrollment of adult and non-traditional students. By applying the CAEL principles to these initial points of contact, enrollment management (EM) professionals can improve related processes for adult students and help ensure that such students have a positive experience, which will result in improved retention rates. Enrollment management officers must identify practical ways to incorporate the principles into everyday office functions. We describe several applications of the principles, but enrollment managers should examine existing policies and practices on their own campuses to determine which suggestions may be effective and/or what other changes might be made to support adult learners. Officials should conduct a thorough audit of all enrollment management functions, including the delivery of services, with two simple questions in mind: How is this process different or more difficult for adult and non-traditional students, and how can my institution provide better assistance?

Traditionally, the first step in enrolling a new student is recruitment or prospect generation. Obstacles arise immediately, however, when EM professionals decide to recruit adult students. Often, EM professionals lack accurate data to inform the development of recruitment plans specific to this demographic. Because this population typically does not exist in one central location, such as a high school or college, EM professionals must be creative in identifying sources of potential students. Various approaches have met with success, but productive recruitment of adult students usually hinges on campaigns and communications that target a specific population relative to certain academic programs or opportunities. Regardless of the effort directed toward adult student recruitment, EM professionals should be aware that many

adult students will identify themselves only at the application stage. For example, unlike prospects in the traditional college-going demographic, they may not identify themselves as prospects by completing online or in-person interest cards or by attending open houses.

One of the most effective strategies is to approach the institution's own non-returners. Many institutions find it beneficial to target a specific population of non-returners—for example, those who have a minimum number of earned hours and to whom degree completion programs can be marketed. Another effective strategy for recruiting new adult students is to connect with employers, unions or other organizations where academic programs related to specific fields of employment may be of interest. Partnerships with employers for full or partial reimbursement of tuition are particularly effective in generating interest in higher education. Even mass mailings, billboards and other general advertisements—though not typically effective recruitment strategies for traditional students—may assist in generating adults' interest in new or newly relevant programs. Perhaps one of the most influential factors in adults' decisions to enroll at a particular institution is word of mouth. If an institution is starting a new program or recruitment effort focused on adult learners, it should ensure that all resources are in place and that adequate services can be provided from the outset. Disgruntled prospective students can mitigate against recruitment efforts to a greater degree than enrollment professionals can correct if prospects are unhappy with the service they initially receive.

The most important contact the prospective student makes is the initial contact. It is critical to establishing a positive relationship between the student and the institution and to generating positive public opinion. Institutions must ensure that all inquiries are handled promptly and efficiently by professionals who are able to answer a wide variety of questions accurately. A dedicated phone number, specific email address and live chat opportunities are essential to this effort. In contrast to traditional prospects, whose initial questions tend to be about college life, residential facilities and clubs or organizations, non-traditional prospects are more likely to ask substantive questions. Adults who are targeted for recruitment should be directed to an office or individual who can answer questions about transfer credit, financial aid programs, options for degree completion and academic programs in which adults typically have a high degree of interest. While no one person can be expected to answer every question, the person primarily responsible for fielding prospects' inquiries should be able to quickly and professionally obtain the answers prospective students need. Adults will balk at being told to contact multiple offices and individuals to obtain answers to their questions. "Adult learner specialists" are ideal points of initial contact for prospective adult students. If such positions do not exist, institutions at least should identify an experienced professional who can provide an array of accurate information. Many prospective adult students are unsure whether to enroll in or return to college; inadequate information may result in their decision to not enroll at all or to not enroll at a particular institution.

In consideration of the fact that many adults are employed and thus are not available to complete college requirements during normal business hours, all steps of the admission and enrollment process should be made available for completion online or by phone. If a step of the enrollment process currently must be completed in person, then every attempt should be made to develop new procedures that will provide the means to complete all processes from a distance and asynchronously. A checklist or flow chart that describes every step in the enrollment process

should also be made available. Adults appreciate “to-do” lists that detail the entire enrollment process. At Marshall University, all newly admitted degree-seeking students are referred to the “New Student Checklist” website for a detailed list of all of the steps that must be completed for enrollment. Some institutions—and even some states—have developed comprehensive one-stop” websites that provide information regarding adult learners’ enrollment options.

In West Virginia, one result of the *DegreeNow* initiative was the creation of the “College for West Virginia (CFWV): RBA Today” Web site, a statewide site with a link to each institution’s individual site for adult learners. Every college in West Virginia was encouraged to develop a linked site that would reflect the look of the main institutional Web site but that would contain the same basic information as other institutions’ linked sites and in a consistent format. Prospective students thus may easily compare multiple institutions’ offerings and services. Other examples of statewide Web sites that target prospective adult students are www.yourcallla.org (Louisiana); www.okhighered.org/reachhigher (Oklahoma); and cpe.ky.gov/policies/academicinit/adult_learner.htm (Kentucky).

Whether part of a statewide initiative or simply a site developed for institutional use, a Web site created especially for prospective adult students should be simple and easy to navigate; provide step-by-step instructions for students who wish to enroll; and include easy-to-locate contact information for the person or office that is the designated contact for adult learners.

The admission process for prospective adult students must be streamlined and simple. This is not to suggest that admission requirements should be altered or weakened for adult learners but rather that the process should be as straightforward as possible, with clear information and procedures. The application should be available both online and as a hard-copy PDF so as to meet the needs of adults who may not be able to submit the application electronically or who may not trust technology. Applicants should be able to pay application fees and, later, enrollment deposits and tuition online or via phone.

Two primary factors influence most adults’ decision whether to enroll or re-enroll in college: time to degree and cost. In order to determine the time to degree, an institution first must determine the number of credits the student has earned and how those credits apply to the proposed degree program. Consequently, information about course equivalencies and transfer credit and how that information translates into a plan of study must be made available early in the enrollment process—preferably at the time of admission—as it likely will prove the most important factor in whether a prospect chooses to enroll.

Most prospective adult students also want to know exactly how much their intended course of study will cost and what types of financial aid may be available to them. Detailed financial aid packages must be provided to prospective students before final decisions regarding enrollment and registration are required. When possible, financial aid advisors who specialize in funding options for non-traditional students should be utilized. These professionals should be well-versed in scholarships and grants for adult students; such funding may make the difference in whether many adults attend college. It is also imperative that admission and financial aid advisors provide accurate information about dual enrollment and third-party payment. The prospective student who knows precisely how his previous credits will transfer, exactly how long it will take to

complete a degree and the approximate cost to complete the degree is far more likely to enroll than one who is given vague or generic information about academic programs and financial opportunities. General programmatic information may generate excitement and interest among prospective students, but it will not result in enrollment unless customized information about time to degree completion and cost is provided early in the admission process.

Once questions about time to degree completion and cost of attendance have been answered, adult prospects who have decided to enroll still will need special consideration as they complete the enrollment process. Advising, which is the next step for many prospects, is another crucial process throughout which the institution must provide competent and friendly service. Non-traditional students often have full schedules and must attend classes around already-established work and child-care routines. Advisors must be mindful of these constraints and aware of all available options as they help such students build schedules that will best meet their needs. Advisors should be familiar with online courses and courses offered at non-traditional times, in particular, as these often are favored by adults who need to complete coursework during non-business hours. Advisors also must be knowledgeable about the academic programs—including degree completion programs and programs that lead to licensure or certification—that are typically of interest to adults. Because these programs tend to be highly structured, those who advise adult students must be able to answer specific questions about programs of study and must be able to support students' efforts to meet complex degree requirements in as little time as possible. Ideally, advisors will be associated with their advisees' intended programs of study. Unlike traditional students, who often seek a wide variety of contacts and experiences during their college experience, adult students tend to seek one or two mentors who can assist them throughout their academic career. The adult student who develops a positive relationship with an advisor or mentor early in his academic career dramatically increases his chances of retention and success.

Either before or during advisement, non-traditional students should participate in a specialized orientation program that provides all of the information they are likely to need during their first terms of enrollment. Adults typically feel more comfortable attending orientation sessions that are geared specifically toward them. Because adult students' schedules may preclude them from attending an orientation session held on campus, the session should be offered online as well. Ideally, adult students may choose whether to participate online or on campus.

A primary objective of orientation, regardless of how it is offered, should be to provide access to the information non-traditional students may need during their first terms of enrollment. Because they will not need all of the information immediately, students should have continued access to the information so they can refer to it at a later date. For example, a tutorial on self-registration may not be necessary at the beginning of a term, but students will want to review the information when it is time to register for the next term.

Information provided in orientation sessions for non-traditional students should include that which is essential for all students, including options for registration, payment, purchasing books, dining, parking, obtaining IDs and computer accounts and utilizing academic support services. Adult students also may need information relative to issues that affect them disproportionately, such as child care (the availability of which may determine whether they can attend classes

during a particular timeframe) and after-hours dining services as well as off-campus dining options (many adult students go to class directly from their jobs or other obligations). Institutions should offer alternatives to traditional dining options and meal plans, particularly at locations where other options are not readily available and/or for students who do not wish to enroll in a meal plan. Parking is yet another concern that must be addressed as part of orientation for non-traditional students. If parking is scarce, institutions may consider issuing discounted parking passes that are valid only during non-peak hours.

Institutions also must highlight processes and procedures that may have changed since returning students were last enrolled. For example, students should be alerted if course schedules and registration are now available exclusively online. Likewise, many campus services are accessed electronically now, which is sure to be a change for students who have not been enrolled for ten or more years.

Adult learners who will enroll exclusively in online courses will have their own unique set of issues that must be addressed, such as how they will obtain an ID and access other services that historically have been provided on campus. Essentially, an institution must ensure that all necessary services and resources are available to online learners and that they are given step-by-step instructions for accessing these services.

Academic support services, in particular, must be made available to online and off-campus students. At the very least, writing and other academic support must be made available online or by phone for students who cannot attend sessions on campus. An institution that does not have staffing available for 24-hour, online academic support might consider a third-party vendor for this service. In addition to ensuring that academic support services are available to adult students, institutions must ensure that the services are geared toward the needs of non-traditional students. For example, a 45-year-old returning student who has not been enrolled in classes for 20 or more years may need particular support in the area of conducting research. Returning adult students often are uncomfortable seeking assistance from tutors who are much younger than they are or in settings populated overwhelmingly by traditional students. Thus, space dedicated for adult students and staffed by tutors who themselves are or recently were non-traditional students can help adults feel more comfortable in seeking assistance and academic support. Variations on this theme include dedicated support and study areas for veterans and other special populations of non-traditional students. Tutors who work with these special populations should be trained to address their unique needs and challenges, to include math anxiety, lack of familiarity with educational technology and inadequate or non-existent research skills relative to 21st century libraries, among others.

In addition to providing instruction in research skills, institutions must make research resources available to off-campus and online students. Administrators should determine the adequacy of current access to research, library and technology resources for non-traditional students both on and off campus. If services are not readily accessible outside of regular business hours, then institutions should consider changes to accommodate the needs of non-traditional or commuter students. Schools also should consider developing partnerships with county or regional libraries and educational centers as part of an effort to address the needs of students who do not have ready access to the Internet.

The CAEL principles are designed to be applied to most functions in higher education. By applying them specifically to the admission and enrollment process, institutions can proactively address many of the needs of prospective adult students. Doing so before or during enrollment will help adult learners identify ways to overcome the barriers that may inhibit their enrollment in college.

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