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Recommended Citation

Watson-Held, Heidi A. (2015). "Promoting Adult Student Success at Four-year Higher Education Institutions," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2015/papers/54>

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Promoting Adult Student Success at Four-year Higher Education Institutions

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Keywords: adult friendly, motivators, barriers, access, persistence, success

Abstract: This study surveyed four-year institutions to examine the extent to which different categories of four-year institutions are meeting adult students' needs and thereby promoting their success.

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to examine the extent to which four-year institutions meet the needs of non-traditional adult students by meeting motivators, removing barriers, and implement interventions suggested by the literature. This study sought to collect information to create a picture of how adult students were being served in 2012.

Review of Literature

This literature review identified the characteristics of non-traditional adult students as understood at this time. It made a case using the literature for the importance of creating awareness of non-traditional adult students' needs. Further, it highlighted how non-traditional adult students' needs differ from those of traditional students, and why it is important to enroll non-traditional students in the university. The literature discussed the importance of offsetting barriers and fostering motivators at points of access and persistence, affirming that by so doing a more even playing field for this segment of students could be created. The literature specifically highlighted the factors that create motivators and barriers together with the interventions that can be undertaken by leadership and legislature to overcome them.

The literature in this area focuses on institutions that have studied the demographics of their adult students. The studies reviewed asked adult students about the motivators for and barriers to studying at the particular institution. Some institutions/authors surveyed their non-traditional adult population, whereas others interviewed a sample of their population in order to obtain the needed data. The data collected were then to be used by university leaders in order to establish institutional policies and supports designed to encourage non-traditional adult students to matriculate, to continue pursuing their course of study, and ultimately to complete their programs.

This study uses these motivators/barriers and interventions to determine whether the extent to which four-year institutions offer services, policies, and programs to adults that are adult-friendly affects their enrollment thereby promoting their success.

Methodology

This study is a performance benchmarking study that included a quantitative survey of four-year institutions in the United States. The data were drawn from 2,923 institutions: 693 public institutions (24%), 1,652 private non-profit institutions (56%), and 578 private for-profit institutions (20%). The sample comprised the total population. The institutions in the responding sample were identified using a convenience sampling method.

The study used its own researcher-designed web-based survey as its primary research tool. This web-based survey invited the staff member, faculty member, or administrator most involved with adult students to answer basic informational questions about programs, services, materials, and policies that are or are not currently in place for adult students. Survey responses were scored to create a scored data set that was examined to determine a benchmark of how institutional sector, institutional size, geographic region, and time of interaction with the institution, i.e. access, persistence, and completion/success, related to the level of coordinated effort overall.

For the purposes of this study, the researcher used a benchmark of 50% or higher of institutions offering a motivator or intervention or overcoming a barrier as indicating whether an institution was meeting the needs necessary to promote the success of adult students. In examining the results of the data collected, the researcher found that the institutions performed well in regard to offering certain services and overcoming certain factors whereas this was not the case for other factors. The researcher used a benchmark of 25–50% and less than 25% of institutions offering/supporting a motivator as a measure for judging whether the institutions had smaller or larger gaps on which to improve. The percentages were based on those institutions offering a motivator, offering an intervention, or overcoming a barrier in the somewhat or to a great extent categories as examined in Chapter 4.

An exhaustive search of the literature found no precedent for establishing the benchmarks described above. Therefore, the researcher designed this study's benchmarking methodology to identify and describe these factors as "best practices" and thus as a model for higher education. The researcher selected above or below 50% as the benchmark because if 50% or more of the institutions are offering a motivator or an intervention or overcoming a barrier, then non-traditional adult students would have a greater chance of getting their needs met. In some areas of the country where adults can choose from among multiple educational institutions for their education, they are likely to find it easier to have their needs met than in areas where the choices for higher education are significantly fewer. If more than 50% of the institutions accommodated a factor, it is more likely that this factor either is or will become a standard best practice in the industry.

Findings and Implications

This study found that for institutions to promote adult students' success they must provide comprehensive counseling, academic and student services that meet the motivators, remove the barriers, and implement the interventions suggested by adult students. The literature review presented in this study identified the motivators, barriers, and interventions. The researcher used these to create questions for this study and thereby benchmark institutional performance.

When deciding how to compare institutions the researcher used a model highlighted by Choy (2002) in which the non-traditional student is understood as having degrees of nontraditional characteristics. In her paper, the degree of interrelationships among non-traditional characteristics defined a scale: traditional student, minimally nontraditional, moderately

nontraditional, and highly nontraditional. The researcher of this dissertation built a similar model in order to consider degrees of coordinated effort for institutions.

Each question answered by the respondents resulted in a score that accumulated into an overall score of coordinated effort provided to the adult students at each institution. The score was based on the data analysis for questions 7–33. The method for calculating the overall coordinated effort scoring is available in Appendix C: Scoring Matrix for the Instrument. This appendix explains how extent, yes/no, and percentage questions were valued and scored. The total number of points possible for an institution was 355. If an institution scored between 0 and 88 they were considered to be providing a low coordinated effort. If an institution scored between 89 and 176 they were considered to be providing a little coordinated effort. If an institution scored between 177 and 264 they were considered to be providing some effort. If an institution scored between 265–355, it was considered to have provided a high coordinated effort. The researcher selected this range to reflect the model established by Choy (2002) and to best show the cluster of institutions within the range.

Based on the respondents' scored answers, the mean was 211, the median was 244, and the mode was 1. The range was 320. The institutions clustered around scores of 200–250. This showed that some of the respondent institutions reported offering high levels of coordinated effort for adult students.

To determine whether an institution's score for a coordinated effort had an effect on their institutional enrollment of adult students, the researcher collected the enrollment data for three years for each institution that provided its IPEDS number. This enrollment data was for the years 2003, 2005, and 2009. The total enrollment of adult students over the three years was averaged. These data were compared to the coordinated effort score. The part-time enrollment of adult students over the three years was also averaged. These data were compared to the coordinated effort score. The study found there was no relationship between level of coordinated effort and total enrollment. Neither was a relationship found between level of coordinated effort and part-time enrollment.

Discussion and Interpretations

These findings for the institutions overall highlight the importance of the message that though institutions reported they are trying to meet motivators, overcome barriers, and implement interventions in the interest of promoting adult students' success, there are a great many more things institutions could do to meet motivators, remove barriers, and implement interventions in general and across time and location. This message was consistent with the literature on the topic.

The researcher had hoped to find improvement since the publication of "Improving Lives through Higher Education Campus Program and Policies for Low Income Adults Study" was completed by Cook and King (2005). According to Cook and King's analysis, institutions that perform well in terms of recruiting and retaining adult students acknowledge the centrality of adults in their mission statements and/or strategic plans by offering special academic programs, implementing early-warning systems to recognize struggling students, setting up full-service satellite campuses, making themselves available on public transportation routes, and finally welcoming adult students in orientation programs. Cook and King observed that institutions had the most room to improve in the following areas: recognizing the low-income adults within their populations, providing appropriate financial aid, identifying and educating faculty who can teach

adults, and offering child care.

In comparison to Cook and King's (2005) results, this study found that institutions did well in terms of serving non-traditional adult students by offering financial aid, providing access to faculty, making their admission application easy to access, offering adult-specific orientation, and accepting transferred credits. This study showed that institutions had the most room to improve in articulating a commitment to serving adult students, tracking their admissions, assisting students with counseling and academic advising, and offering alternative program types, like night and weekend programs.

In the 1999 paper, "Serving Adult Learners in Higher Education: Findings from CAEL's Benchmarking Study," the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) recorded best practices for serving adults. The paper advocates that institutions with a focus on adults should articulate a mission that is adult-focused, share its decision-making process with adult students and the community, use an open admissions process that works to create the best educational matches for adults, assist students with making informed educational planning decisions, offer pre-enrollment and ongoing counseling, provide prior learning assessment, and work to make programs affordable, accessible, and high quality. CAEL created a set of "Principles of Effectiveness for Serving Adult Students." In a follow-up study Flint's 2005 report, "How Well Are We Serving Our Adult Learners? Investigating the Impact of Institutions on Success and Retention" further explored the recommendations and principles set out by CAEL and looked specifically at how institutions following these principles affect adult student retention and success. The paper asked institutions that had used these tools to determine whether changes they had made had led to adult student re-enrollment. According to the study, institutions that were following the recommendations and so meeting the needs of their adult student populations saw a higher level of re-enrollment and ultimate success rates versus those that were not doing so.

In comparison to the results reported by CAEL and Flint, most of the institutions in the present study fall far short of the "Principles of Effectiveness for Serving Adults." Even for those institutions that did show a high level of coordinated effort, their enrollment (not re-enrollment) did not reflect this effort as having an impact. This is evidenced by the lack of a relationship between level of coordinated effort and enrollment of full- and part-time non-traditional adult students as found in research questions 3 and 4 of the study.

In his article "Reform Higher Education with Capitalism?" (2005), Berg clearly stated how for-profit institutions of higher education could better meet the needs of non-traditional students. In his view, a "for profit solution to the access problem is accomplished through an organizational model that concentrates on meeting the needs of ethnic minority, adult, and first generation college students through a focus on customer service and by filling gaps in the higher education system" (p. 30). Feldman (2004) corroborated this view, claiming that for-profit institutions are in direct competition with traditional higher education institutions. In his account, Berg focused on how for-profits provide better service and better faculty training than do their not-for-profit counterparts. The article considered for-profit higher education institutions as superior in regard to the following factors: (a) awareness of federal financial aid programs, (b) provision of counseling during convenient evening hours, (c) convenient campus locations, (d) use of a learner-centered pedagogical approach, (e) vocational and professionally oriented curricula.

This study found that private for-profit institutions do well at marketing to adults,

encouraging students to set up a family and social network, offering extended online student services, offering alternative program types, and offering flexibility with requirements. However this study did not find that overall private for-profits were doing any better than public or private non-profits were, both of which met more motivators, barriers and interventions overall. On many factors, private for-profits did worse. This finding is counter to that found in the literature (Berg, 2005).

In *Adult Learners in Higher Education: Barriers to Success and Strategies to Improve Results*, Chao et al. (2007) examined the difficulties adult students experience in trying to earn credentials that will benefit them in the labor market. The authors examined innovative practices and modification policies for adult students that foster ultimate success. The paper divided the barriers into five categories: (a) supply and demand dynamics, (b) accessibility, (c) affordability, (d) accountability, and (e) recommendations. The study recommended that future research could explore the approach of increasing the capacity of higher education and thereby its ability to serve more adult learners and the approach of improving faculty quality and preparation in programs and fields where adult students are concentrated. A further recommendation was that researchers should consider the implications of encouraging employers to provide input into curriculum design. Chao's paper, thus highlighted the idea that institutions need to meet societal educational needs and thereby remove the stated barriers. As noted in the present study's literature review, there is a need to meet students' demand for knowledge and skills that fulfill global needs.

This study showed that institutions do not place a high priority on providing services to adult students and any proposal to create greater capacity to serve them is at this time unlikely to be pursued. For the institutions in this study, less than half were likely to even consider experience working with adults as a factor when hiring faculty. The institution's involvement with employers was also not seen as important, with 55% of institutions offering no contract programs with employers.

In *Nontraditional Undergraduates: Findings from the Condition of Education*, Choy (2002) defined the non-traditional adult student as the new traditional. Choy argued that reducing time to completion would significantly impact the risk factors for adult students. Choy also pointed to the enrollment of moderately and highly non-traditional students in distance education programs, rather than in face-to-face environments as a trend that will continue. In Choy's view, participating in distance education may allow nontraditional students to overcome some of the difficulties they encounter in coordinating their work and school schedules or in obtaining the classes they want. Institutions offering distance education expect enrollments to continue to grow. Aslanian (2008) cited a Sloan study that cautions that future growth at current rates in distance education is not sustainable; they contend that start-ups are over. There will be few new institutions entering the market—"that is, every institution planning to offer online education is already doing so" (p. 7).

Are adult-friendly institutions "primarily online"? In this study, only 24.7% of institutions offered distance or online education programs. However, 7% of the institutional respondents suggested that this is something they would like their institution to offer, and 10% considered this alternative delivery method as innovative.

Findings in this study were consistent with the literature and found that institutions have a long way to go in offering all the needed services to make their institutions adult-friendly. Some

strides have been made since these other benchmarks were set, but more can be done.

Conclusion

This study asked questions about institutions on a national scale and how they promote adult student success. It sought to understand the motives, backgrounds, and achievements of non-traditional adult students attending institutions as reported by the literature. This study offered conclusions about best practices, services, and policies at four-year institutions that promote or hinder the success of non-traditional adult students. This study also made recommendations about how adult students, institutional leaders, and legislators can better serve this audience by promoting success through adult-friendly programs, services, materials, and policies. This study's results can be used by institutions, adult students, and legislators to compare their regions, sectors, or sizes, and to more appropriately design their programs in order to promote the success of adult students and prepare them for the future in the global market place.

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