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Susan Mancuso

Western Washington University, USA

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Adult Learner-centered Institutions: Best Practices for the 21st Century

Susan Mancuso
Western Washington University, USA

Abstract: *Adult student enrollment in higher education is approaching 50%, yet most college practices have been designed for younger, traditional age students. This study uses a benchmarking research methodology, including surveys and site visits, to identify best practices at selected adult centered institutions. The findings were distilled into one overarching theme and thirteen related themes.*

Purpose

Current policies and practices of higher education have been primarily designed for a diminishing proportion of full-time, traditional age students. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (Hussar, 1998) in 1996-97 43% of undergraduate students were age 25 and older. An issue in higher education is what constitutes an adult centered college that is responsive to the needs of what was once a nontraditional student population but is now increasingly becoming the norm. The purpose of this study was to employ a research methodology utilized by business – benchmarking – to identify and describe findings and principles of “best practices” for serving adult learners, which in turn could serve as a meaningful guide for colleges and universities for the 21st century.

Theoretical Framework

Prior work has been done in the past decade to identify higher education “good practices” for adult learners, including “Principles of Good Practice for Alternative and External Degree Programs for Adults” (Principles, 1990), and “Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education” (Chickering & Gamson, 1987). While these are inspiring documents, they tend to reflect idealized goals rather than empirical research into existing practices that are most effective for adult learners. The critical need to rethink our practices in higher education is succinctly stated in one of the findings of the Commission for a Nation of Lifelong Learners (1997): “Many current higher education practices are ill adapted to the needs of employers and adult learners. They pose barriers to participation, including a lack of flexibility in calendar and scheduling, academic content, modes of instruction and availability of learning services, among others.”

There is a plethora of literature about how adults learn (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999), needs of adult learners in higher education (Pascarella & Terrenzini, 1991), and examples of institutional practices (Chickering & Reisser, 1995). Given the myriad of principles, practices, and models in the literature about serving adult students in higher education, a key question is: What are the actual “best practices” being used in colleges and universities in North America?

Research Methodology

Benchmarking as a research strategy emerged in the 1990s, in the business sector. Benchmarking is “the process of identifying, understanding and adapting outstanding practices from other organizations to help an organization improve performance” (APQC, 1997). Benchmarking is probably more adaptable to “higher education than other business quality management and improvement strategies because it is founded on the very skills which academics routinely practice – the skills of research, academic inquiry and critical analysis” (Jackson, 1998). The benchmarking methodology in this study consisted of a multi-step research process.

Forming a Benchmarking Group

The group consisted of three subject matter experts from U.S. and Canadian higher education institutions, representatives from the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) and benchmarking specialists from the American Productivity and Quality Center (APQC).

Planning the Research Project

The group met numerous times to identify the scope of the project, to nominate best practice institutions

to be surveyed, and to design the initial written screening survey.

Screening Survey to Identify Best Practice Institutions

Sixty-three higher education institutions in North America and Europe were nominated as potential best practice institutions and were mailed a screening survey. The 33 item survey asked about best practices in the research scope areas of informational issues, access and equity, academic and social integration, and career integration. Thirty-three institutions responded by the deadline.

Best Practice Site Selection

Subject matter experts analyzed the blinded survey answers and selected six best practice higher education institutions in a day-long analysis process. Five institutions are in the U.S. and one is in Canada.

Site Visits

While the screening survey asked what the best practices were, site visits to the six institutions added the “how” and “why” of the practices. A thirty question interview guide structured the day-long data collection with faculty, staff, and students at each institution. Transcripts of the interviews and discussions at the site visits provided a common data record for later analysis, along with individual notes and voluminous documents and materials from each institution.

Data Analysis

The subject matter experts read and formally analyzed all the transcripts and other data and individually proposed best practice “themes.” The group convened and further analyzed the data and themes and distilled them into an initial set of findings. These findings continued to be refined in two additional rounds of analysis.

Findings

Through the comprehensive benchmarking screening process, the following six colleges and universities were selected as “best practice” institutions:

- Athabasca University, Athabasca, Alberta, Canada
- School of New Resources, College of New Rochelle, Bronx, New York

- The School for New Learning, DePaul University, Chicago, Illinois
- Empire State College (SUNY), Saratoga Springs, New York
- Marylhurst University, Marylhurst, Oregon
- Sinclair Community College, Dayton, Ohio

The complex findings have been distilled into one overarching theme and thirteen findings. These findings represent best practices for colleges and universities educating and serving adult learners. The overarching theme reflects the centrality of a belief system, values, and ethos in which employees of the institutions think, breath, and operate with adult learners in mind – “Adult learner centered institutions have a culture in which flexibility, individuation, and adult-centered learning drive institutional practice.” The set of thirteen findings operate within this pervasive adult-centered theme.

1. Institutions have clearly articulated missions that permeate the institution and inspire and direct practice.
2. Institutional decision-making is a shared responsibility that uses collaborative processes inclusive of faculty, staff and students to create rapid, flexible responses to student and community needs.
3. Curriculum is designed to meet individual needs of adult learners.
4. The institution uses prior learning assessment programs to honor and credit the learning which adults have previously acquired and to help plan new learning.
5. Multiple methods of instructional delivery are provided to help adult learners meet their learning goals.
6. The teaching-learning process actively involves students in collaborative learning experiences typically centered around their lives and work.
7. The institution uses an inclusive, non-competitive admissions process designed to determine the best educational match for the adult learner.
8. The institution engages adult learners in an ongoing dialogue designed to assist learners to make informed educational planning decisions.
9. The institution makes student services easily accessible and convenient to adult learners through many venues.

10. Full-time faculty perform a blended role which combines instruction, student services and administration.
11. The institution employs part-time/adjunct faculty to assure financial viability and uses them to enhance quality through their special expertise, connections to workplaces, and to deliver an accessible and flexible curriculum.
12. The institution uses technology to enrich one-on-one communication.
13. The institution makes continuous and deliberate efforts to ensure that its education remains affordable for adults while maintaining access and quality.

Discussion

The final step in benchmarking is to adapt research findings to one's institution with the goal of improving practices. One challenge in adapting these research findings is that they represent philosophical beliefs substantially different from most traditional higher education institutions. Such beliefs include a humanistic view that adults are self-motivated learners striving to improve their self-understanding, learners are truly at the center of all policies and practices, great flexibility in roles and practices among faculty and students is critical for fluid and dynamic decision-making, and practices are to be implemented in context of students being self-directed and empowered learners. These findings reflect an integrated college culture centered on adult learners and not separate practices that can easily be adapted into a culture with a dissimilar culture.

Many perspectives and principles common to adult education were clearly visible in these colleges, including andragogical and inclusive learning environments (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 1998; Tisdell, 1995), involvement and leadership among all stakeholders in the organization (Kouzes and Posner, 1987), and grounding learning in the experiences of the learners (Kolb, 1984). As colleges and universities of the 21st century evolve toward being "learning colleges" (Barr and Tagg, 1995) rather than teacher-centered colleges, and as these colleges move beyond slogans such as "student first" to actual practices that center around student learning interests, then the findings from the six colleges studied likely will be visible and active in numerous institutions of higher education across North America.

This research study provides guideposts giving directions for new responses by institutions seeking to effectively meet the needs of the growing number of adult learners in higher education. A flexible, student-centered college culture better meets the needs of adult learners than current practices designed for traditional college-age students.

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