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Undergraduate Adult Learners' Acquisition of Credit Through Multiple Means

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Abstract: Using available institutional data, the authors determined the extent to which Penn State's undergraduate adult learners acquired credit through means in addition to enrolling in other higher education institutions, the frequency with which several means are used, and offered suggestions for improvements to increase adults' use of these options.

Methodology

For purposes of this study, an adult learner was defined as someone 24 years of age or older or a veteran of active military duty. All adult undergraduate enrollees for five academic years (2000-2001 through 2004-2005) were identified and included in the analysis. Multiple files on the university's Data Warehouse in addition to information available only on the university's mainframe were merged to learn which students presented credits from other higher education institutions and other means of assessing prior college-level learning. The higher education institutions, as well as course credit acquired outside degree programs, were identified using the Codes for all Known Post Secondary Institutions (CWIPSE) codes. These analyses were very difficult to conduct due to the fragmented availability of information and complexity of data manipulation needed.

Findings

In the preliminary report of the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning's (CAEL's) 2006 national survey (1) of prior learning methods at 272 American higher education institutions, most institutions accept College-Level Examination Program (CLEP) Exams (87%) and Advanced Placement (AP) Exams (84%). With lesser frequency they accept credit recommendations from the American Council on Education (ACE) Guides (70%), portfolios (66%), and challenge exams (57%). Inasmuch as Penn State University, awards credits using CLEP and AP exams, ACE Guides, portfolios, challenge exams, and other methods, the focus of our inquiry was on the extent to which Penn State's adult learners actually acquired credit through multiple means, including transfer of courses from other higher education institutions.

General

Over the five academic-year period, forty-three percent of undergraduate adults (16,792 out of 39,077) presented course credits of some type for evaluation. Ninety-nine percent of those adults (16,616 out of 16,792) acquired course credit through means other than Penn State enrollment. Of the 16,616 undergraduate adult students receiving credit, 91% were awarded transfer credit from another college or university, 13% received credit for military training, 4% via portfolio assessment, 3% AP credit, 2% CLEP, and 0.4% ACE CREDIT. (Note: students acquired credit through multiple means.) The range of credit awards follows: 20% were awarded 60-89 credits, 19% received 0.5-8 credits, 14% 30-44 credits, 14% 9-17 credits, 13% 18-29 credits, 12% 45-59 credits, and 8% 90 or more credits.

Transfer Credits from Other Higher Education Institutions

Undergraduate adult learners were awarded 630,770 credits in transfer for 218,876 courses completed at other higher education institutions. These 218,876 courses represent 94% of all courses that were awarded credit; the 630,770 transfer credits represent 94% of all credits (672,112) that Penn State awarded. Undergraduate adults transferred 407,573 credits from 154 Pennsylvania institutions. Fifty-two percent of credits transferred were from community colleges, 21% from private colleges and universities, 19% from state-owned institutions, and the remaining 8% from other state-related universities. Undergraduate adults transferred 223,197 credits from 1,942 out-of-state institutions and were most likely to transfer courses from Ohio, New York, Maryland, California, New Jersey, and Florida institutions (in descending order). Sixty-three percent of transferred courses were awarded general credit, rather than course-to-course credit. Course-to-course credit was frequently awarded for English, psychology, history, and mathematics courses. For adults transferring from other colleges and universities, the average time since last enrollment was 6.2 years.

Credit from Other Means

Penn State's undergraduate adult students earn credit from military training, AP and CLEP tests, portfolio assessment, and ACE CREDIT. Only about six per cent of the courses for which credits were awarded came from these other sources. Of the credits earned through other means, 53% were from military training, 32% from portfolios, 8% AP, 5% CLEP, and 2% from CREDIT. Fifty-six percent of all military courses accepted by Penn State were acquired as general physical education or general health education credits. Ninety-six per cent of all courses awarded credit via portfolio assessment were in nursing and took the form of awarding credits for a block of courses as a consequence of students' completion of an associate degree in nursing or a diploma nursing program. These were not individually prepared and assessed portfolios as referred to in CAEL literature.

Implications for Practice

Based upon this investigation, the authors offered three recommendations. The first pertained to transfer courses being accepted as either general course credits or as direct equivalents to a Penn State course. Most adult applicants want to know in advance how these credits could be utilized. The adult transfer applicant would be better served if an academic adviser reviewed the transferable credits during the admission offer stage in order for the student to know specifically how the credits would enable them to meet degree requirements.

The second recommendation pertained to adult students' underutilization of other means of credit acquisition. As an institution, Penn State should consider initiating both internal and external campaigns to increase awareness among students, faculty, and staff of the alternative means of credit acquisition.

Finally, given that the largest number of students transferred credits from a community college, Penn State campuses in proximity to community colleges should consider developing advising-based articulation agreements and major-specific transfer guides in order to encourage and facilitate transfer to Penn State.

D. Bamford-Rees, personal communication, December 11, 2000