Returning Adult Students
WINTER 2011

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Pending periodicals postage paid at Washington, DC. Postmaster: send address changes to Peer Review, 1818 R Street, NW, Washington, DC 20009.
In his 2011 State of the Union address, President Barack Obama restated his national goal to have America attain the highest proportion of college graduates in the world by the end of the decade. This challenge has inspired multiple efforts across the country to increase the number of Americans with college degrees. Many have noted that reaching these goals will require educating students from both traditional and nontraditional-aged groups.

While many projects and organizations are focused on increasing the overall number of graduates, AAC&U is also committed to getting all students—including returning adult students—the learning they need to deal with the complexities of the world. As the 2007 Liberal Education and America’s Promise (LEAP) Report, College Learning for the New Global Century, stated, “It should be a national priority to ensure that students, whatever their career choices and preparation, become richly prepared for a changing economy, for the option of further study, and for a lifetime of continuous learning—as employees and as citizens.”

Returning adult students—those who attended college but did not persist to graduation—make up an increasing percentage of students matriculating each year to both two- and four-year institutions. To receive a college education that will prepare them for twenty-first-century challenges, these nontraditional students must have a broad set of learning outcomes, including those developed in technical fields and those developed through the arts and sciences. AAC&U has defined this set of outcomes—called the “essential learning outcomes”—through its LEAP initiative. With the essential learning outcomes as their compass and with participation in programs that focus on the unique learning needs of this population, more adult learners will be able to both graduate and carry with them, throughout their lives, outcomes that will help them navigate a highly competitive and volatile world.

During his January speech, President Obama saluted a fifty-five-year-old furniture factory worker who soon will earn her college degree. I also applaud her accomplishments because I have witnessed another adult learner—my friend Sharon Stephens—pursue her degree at midlife. Through Sharon’s successes and struggles, I’ve learned how challenging it can be for adult students to balance school, work, and family obligations. Sharon, a senior financial analyst for the FDIC, was a classic “swirler” who began her college career at Bowie State at seventeen and over a forty-year span attended five institutions, finally finishing her studies at the University of Maryland University College (UMUC), an institution with a successful adult learning program that is profiled later in this issue.

“You know, I don’t really need a degree for promotion purposes,” Sharon shared with me when I asked her to reflect on her college experiences. “I want to graduate more for a sense of personal accomplishment. Plus, I’ve gotten so much from my classes that without them I wouldn’t be where I am now. As a starry-eyed first-year student, I started off planning to major in theater. That changed to polisci and finally to management, which turned out to be the major that most encompassed my prior classes.” During her lifelong career at the FDIC, the knowledge and skills Sharon acquired in her college courses allowed her to be promoted to more responsible positions, including that of a bank examiner. “My bank examiner experience equipped me to pursue the prior learning class at UMUC,” she says. Through UMUC’s Prior Learning program, she developed a portfolio that demonstrated her facilities in business and accounting learned during her FDIC work, for which she was granted college credit. Now, almost at the finish line, Sharon’s last two classes are college math and statistics. She hopes to finish her degree in the fall. Sharon’s experience of weaving her knowledge from the classroom into the workplace and back again demonstrates the strides that adult students can make with the proper support and guidance.

This issue of Peer Review features articles that offer best practices in undergraduate education for adult students like Sharon. This collection of articles provides overviews of research on the challenges institutions face in giving all students from a range of ages and circumstances the liberal education outcomes they need to make a better life for themselves—at home, at work, and in the community.

—SHELLEY JOHNSON CAREY
Strategies for Becoming Adult-Learning-Focused Institutions

Rebecca Klein-Collins, director of research, Council of Adult and Experiential Learning

Since the 1970s, the number of adults in postsecondary education has increased steadily, and today, learners aged twenty-five and older are the fastest-growing population at our nation’s colleges and universities. The reasons for this trend are many—a growing awareness that higher education credentials can lead to greater individual economic success, a shift in our economy from manufacturing to service industry jobs, and the constant economic changes that require workers to change jobs and even industries multiple times over the course of their careers. The most recent data from the National Center for Education Statistics (2008) indicate that nearly 40 percent of all college enrollments are students aged twenty-five or older—with actual numbers that are likely much higher today than projected, due to the economic recession that is driving individuals back to school.

Colleges and universities are recognizing the significant size of their adult learner populations, and are realizing that the adult learner has needs and faces barriers that are different from those of the “traditional” student. If institutions find ways to remove those barriers, they could help more of our population achieve higher levels of educational attainment. While this goal is important for individual economic well-being and career growth and for strengthening our nation’s overall economic competitiveness, colleges and universities may also realize a significant new source of enrollments and revenue.

While recent trends are seeing a brighter spotlight to shine on this population, there has been much research done on this issue for many years. For example, K. Patricia Cross’s research several years ago sketched out a number of barriers, the standard classifications of which are personal, attitudinal, and structural (Cross 1981). Personal or situational barriers include those that are related to lack of time (due to work schedules, family obligations, dependent care, health issues, etc.) and lack of money. Attitudinal or dispositional barriers refer to how people view their ability to succeed at education and training, with many people burdened by fear of failure, particularly if they had not been successful in school earlier in their lives. Structural or institutional barriers are those that the schools themselves may create—for example, by offering classes only during the daytime or only in sixteen-week semesters.

Building on this research, leading institutions have worked hard for many years to remove barriers to adult learners, in many cases implementing some or all of what the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) has come to call the Principles of Effectiveness for Serving Adult Learners. We call the colleges and universities that implement these principles Adult Learning Focused Institutions (ALFIs). Developed in 1999 from benchmarking research with APQC (a company specializing in benchmarking, knowledge management, measurement, and process improvement) and then later refined, the ALFI principles address learning barriers through a variety of policies and practices.

PRINCIPLES OF EFFECTIVENESS FOR SERVING ADULT LEARNERS

Based on the nine principles below, CAEL, the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems, and higher education consulting firm Noel-Levitz have developed the ALFI Toolkit to help institutions assess their effectiveness in serving adults. Colleges and universities have used the ALFI tools for a variety of purposes, including internal program review and development of strategic plans, but especially for focusing institutional attention on adult learner needs and issues (see sidebar for more information on the ALFI toolkit).

The ALFI principles (see fig. 1) are described below and adapted to include examples of policies and practices that colleges and universities could embrace in order to recruit, prepare for, and welcome adult learners.
OUTREACH
In the ALFI model, special outreach designed to engage adult learners helps overcome barriers in time, place, and tradition to create better access to educational opportunities. Potential students need to be aware of programs that meet their needs and need to know how to access these programs. Strategies to reach out in a concerted way to adult learners could include specialized marketing materials (for example, with photos of adult learners) and advertising campaigns. Adult learners are not just interested in personal enrichment but also in retraining, refreshing workplace skills, and preparing for new careers. The outreach strategies need to acknowledge those very real goals and show how the institution is prepared to help the adult learner reach them.

LIFE AND CAREER PLANNING
Providing and equipping career and educational advisers to help with decision making is an important strategy for helping adults—many of whom do not know what kind of program to pursue, how to get started, and how to make it all happen given individual life circumstances. Adults’ learning goals need to be achievable and get them where they want to be in within their timeframe. Having someone help identify the range of options available and provide information on labor market demands for particular skills is critical to ensure a successful learning experience. This may mean finding ways to make certain that college advisers are well-trained in a range of career opportunities and the kinds of education and training that are needed for those opportunities. Adults will likely need to have access to these educational and career advising services during non-work hours or have options such as phone or online appointments to accommodate their busy schedules.

FINANCING
One of adult learners’ most significant barriers to postsecondary education is, of course, the cost. Some working adults may be able to rely on assistance from employers through tuition assistance benefits to pursue college degrees, but these benefits will not be available to all individuals seeking lifelong learning, and even those who have tuition assistance benefits may not be able to use the benefits for some purposes—for example, to pursue a completely different line of work.

Colleges and universities serving adult learners need to provide them with information about accessing financial aid or payment plans and with information about what options are available for part-time students. Institutions should make sure that their own financial aid practices do not penalize the part-time or one-class-at-a-time student.

Other financial assistance options may be on the horizon as policymakers and stakeholders begin to realize the value of a skilled workforce to local economies. CAEL is currently piloting Lifelong Learning Accounts (LiLAs) in several sites across the country. A LiLA account is an employer-matched, portable, worker-owned account used to finance career-related education and training. It is similar in concept to a 401(k): employee contributions to LiLA education and training accounts are matched by their employers. In the 111th Congress, Congressmen John B. Larson (D-CT), Peter Roskam (R-IL), Jared Polis (D-CO), and Erik Paulsen (R-MN) introduced legislation that would establish LiLAs. This bipartisan support for LiLAs indicates that there may be future opportunities to improve financial support available for adult learners.

Figure 1. CAEL’s Principles of Effectiveness for Serving Adult Learners

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outreach</th>
<th>The institution conducts its outreach to adult learners by overcoming barriers of time, place, and tradition in order to create lifelong access to educational opportunities.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Life and Career Planning</td>
<td>The institution addresses adult learners’ life and career goals before or at the onset of enrollment in order to assess and align its capacities to help learners reach their goals.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financing</td>
<td>The institution promotes choice using an array of payment options for adult learners in order to expand equity and financial flexibility.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment of Learning Outcomes</td>
<td>The institution defines and assesses the knowledge, skills, and competencies acquired by adult learners both from the curriculum and from life/work experience in order to assign credit and confer degrees with rigor.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching–Learning Process</td>
<td>The institution’s faculty uses multiple methods of instruction (including experiential and problem-based methods) for adult learners in order to connect curricular concepts to useful knowledge and skills.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Support Systems</td>
<td>The institution assists adult learners using comprehensive academic and student support systems in order to enhance students’ capacities to become self-directed, lifelong learners.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>The institution uses information technology to provide relevant and timely information and to enhance the learning experience.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategic Partnerships</td>
<td>The institution engages in strategic relationships, partnerships, and collaborations with employers and other organizations in order to develop and improve educational opportunities for adult learners.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transitions</td>
<td>The institution supports guided pathways that lead into and from its programs and services in order to ensure that students’ learning will apply usefully to achieving their educational and career goals.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

ASSESSMENT OF LEARNING OUTCOMES

One way that adult-focused institutions earn their reputations for serving adult learners well is by recognizing the learning outcomes that an adult already has achieved, regardless of where that learning took place. Policies that allow students to apply transfer credits toward general education and even major requirements can minimize the problem of "wasted credits." In addition, institutions should also recognize previous learning that has occurred outside of institutions altogether.

Adult learners often have college-level knowledge or skills acquired outside the classroom. They may, for example, have several years of work experience they acquired through on-the-job training, workshops and company-sponsored training, and leadership or technical responsibilities. Adult learners also may have served or be currently serving in the military, gaining a range of learning through formal training, informal on-the-job learning, and leadership experience.

Adults also have countless opportunities in their everyday lives for self-directed learning or learning that happens through volunteer work, hobbies, and other activities. Some of this learning is comparable to college-level instruction.

An important institutional strategy to try to capture the college-level knowledge that adults have already gained from their experience is prior learning assessment, or PLA, a term for a variety of approaches that evaluate an individual’s learning from work and life experience for college credit.

PLA comes in many forms—including written exams and portfolio evaluations—and many colleges and universities nationwide already offer some kind of PLA to their students. Expanding these services and making them more widely available and recognized is important for helping adults reach their learning and career goals more quickly. For colleges and universities that do not have the capacity to provide such services in-house, CAEL has recently launched LearningCounts.org, an online PLA service for institutions and individual learners.

TEACHING–LEARNING PROCESS

The way in which instruction is delivered is an important factor that can contribute to an adult learner’s success, with some of the best strategies being those that treat the learner’s own life and work experiences as valuable contributions to the learning process.

For adults using education to prepare for and pursue new careers, it may also be more effective for the material to be presented using the language and problems that will arise in the workplace. Adults may also want the courses to be delivered in smaller and more accelerated modules than the traditional sixteen-week semester—an approach favored by many colleges that specialize in helping adult students get in, get the learning they need, and get out again.

STUDENT SUPPORT SYSTEMS

In thirty-six years of serving adult learners, CAEL has found that they have many life challenges and responsibilities to manage while trying to pursue education. In addition to working, adult learners may need to care for young dependents or ailing parents, manage a household, deal with family crises or illnesses, and so on. Systems for supporting the adult learner and helping him or her succeed despite all of these challenges are very important and can include advising, mentoring, financial advising and assistance, new student orientation, and guidance throughout a student’s academic career. Clear curricular maps and career pathways, as well as prior learning assessment, can also help adults navigate toward their goals.

Adult learners may also need the human connection outside the classroom to help them feel that they belong at the institution and that they have people to whom they can turn for help and guidance. The feelings of alienation can be quite acute for many adults, particularly when significant age differences exist between them and their classmates, as well as between them and some of their instructors. The availability of peer support groups can help overcome these barriers.

TECHNOLOGY

Technology is an important factor in providing adult learners with what they need to succeed in college and in the workplace. The institution should use information technology to provide relevant and timely information and to enhance the learning experience. Exemplary use of technology should bridge geographical barriers to learning, provide flexible and timely administrative services, and expand the choices for learning modes.

ALFI Toolkit

The ALFI Assessment Toolkit consists of two instruments: the Institutional Self-Assessment Survey (ISAS) and the Adult Learner Inventory™ (ALI). Taken together, the surveys provide a powerful tool for colleges and universities that want to align institutional policy and structure with the needs of adult learners enrolled in credit-bearing programs.

Used together, the Institutional Self-Assessment Survey and the Adult Learner Inventory compare faculty and administration views of existing adult programs with the actual perceptions of adult learners.

Institutions using the tools receive a report that provides:

- a detailed campus report on the findings from both surveys
- comparative data on how the perceptions of adult students match up to the perceptions of faculty and administration
- national benchmarking data to compare an institution’s results with institutions serving adults nationwide
It is important to keep in mind, however, that none of these exemplary technology practices do any good if the adult learner is not comfortable with technology in the first place—a particular concern for adult learners in the older age ranges. Colleges and universities will need to find ways to reach out to those students, determine their needs, and help them develop the technology skills they will need to succeed both in class and in their hoped-for career.

STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS
Adult-learner-focused institutions often succeed with adult learners by forming strategic alliances with local organizations and employers to ensure that workers learn about educational opportunities and that students learn about work opportunities. Colleges and universities can leverage these relationships to ensure that their curricula and practices remain relevant and current. As colleges and universities consider how best to serve adults and their various reasons for returning to learning, these partnerships become even more important.

CONNECTING EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES
Institutions can help adult learners persist and succeed in their studies by explicitly recognizing the connections between the current educational experience and both its antecedents and consequences. For example, institutions focused on adult learners will have concluded articulation agreements with a wide variety of other institutions in the region. They will also have helped their students with transitions to employment by providing opportunities for internships with local employers, community agencies, and labor unions.

The ALFI principles are integrated, indivisible, and imperative. Working together, the principles help ensure that adult learners will succeed in their academic endeavors and attain their educational objectives. Colleges and universities can help adult learners by using these principles as a guide to recognizing adults’ learning needs, addressing their barriers, and honoring the experience that they bring to the learning environment. Institutions should consider a number of different strategies:

- adopting marketing approaches that reflect adult learners’ concerns, respect their ambitions, and recognize their learning goals
- assisting adult learners in identifying jobs and related educational paths for what they want to achieve in their careers
- providing training and support services at times and in places that are accessible to adults who may be working full time
- assisting with new strategies for financing learning, such as Lifelong Learning Accounts
- providing avenues for adult learners to accelerate the learning process—or at least minimize the need for them to sit through what they already learned elsewhere
- honoring the life and work experiences of older learners, both in the classroom and in campus life generally
- helping to close the generational digital divide, so that adult learners of all ages are more comfortable with the technology that they will need to use both for education and in their careers
- working closely with employers, community-based organizations, economic development agencies, and the government to design and offer new workforce learning programs that meet the labor force needs of local economies and the ambitions of adults.
- helping adult learners connect their current educational efforts with both their past and their future.

With these strategies, colleges and universities will pave the way for adults to succeed in postsecondary learning and degree-earning.

REFERENCES
What Adult Learners Can Teach Us about All Learners: A Conversation with L. Lee Knefelkamp

L. Lee Knefelkamp is a professor of psychology and education at Teachers College, Columbia University, and a senior scholar at AAC&U. Her career has included research and teaching about intellectual, ethical, identity, and intercultural development; curriculum transformation; issues of race, ethnicity, and gender; campus climate assessment; and the psychology of organizational change. Knefelkamp is currently codirector of the Eisenhower Leader Development Program, a master’s program for Army officers conducted jointly by Teachers College and the United States Military Academy at West Point, and she also helped develop Teachers College’s new Executive Master’s Degree Program in Change Leadership, a program for midcareer adult learners.

Here, Knefelkamp talks about how working with adult students can inform our interactions with students of all ages, what tradeoffs come with new educational technology, and why K. Patricia Cross’s research on adult learners from the 1980s is still extraordinarily relevant today.

What are the critical challenges that higher education must consider with respect to adult learners?

One critical issue is that we still write about college in most of our texts with the assumption that the students are eighteen to twenty-two years old. Troy Duster of NYU and I were once coteaching an intercultural learning class. He went to the blackboard and wrote, “95 percent minority”—about the population of Los Angeles public schools—and asked “What’s wrong here?” Of course, it’s that 95 percent isn’t a minority at all. You could see people really thinking about that. We need to have in our heads a similar image of adult learners. The vast majority of learners in higher education are not eighteen to twenty-two. The minority is now the majority. We are still focusing a great deal of our research on what used to be the traditional. What was traditional is now the nontraditional. That is truly a seismic shift.

Second, we haven’t realized all the different ways we can use scheduling, technology, and communication to be responsive to adult learning. The structure is still mired in the assumptions of traditional and residential. Finally, one thing that K. Patricia Cross did, decades ago, was to focus on understanding the unique capabilities of the student. You need to design curriculum that is responsive. But what Cross was able to do in the American mind, long before population statistics changed, was to say, We have a variety of learners and nontraditional-aged learners need to be taken into account. Any individual differences—first-generation students, adult students, new learners, etc.—cause us to think about all learners. The challenge for the faculty is taking into account the vast experience of adult learners, and putting ourselves into a more dialogic teaching mode. We can’t just assume that we’re delivering knowledge in one direction. The students are not vessels to be filled. We’re not the font of knowledge—the real challenge is in the interplay. It needs to make the academy not less learned, but more humble and more open to the exchange.

How can faculty members be responsive in their teaching of adult students?

We need to treat adult students as colearners, and we need to do that for traditional-aged students, too. One of the great notions of John Dewey is that learning is meaningful to the degree that we can connect it to the concrete experiences of our student’s lives. So adult learners bring a rich array of life learning and life experiences to the classroom. And good teaching for adult learners needs to first assess who they are and then needs to connect the classroom material to that rich archive of their life learning. There’s a triad of adult learning: Who the students are—their knowledge and background and situation; what we have to offer them—the knowledge base; and what they are going to use the knowledge for—the job they’re going to do.
The adult learner helps remind us that any learner brings something to the table. And we need to see how we can assess who that learner is and what they’ve experienced and how they learn, and put that into dialogue with what we need to teach and how we teach it. The adult learner is almost the classic example of how we need to match what we’re teaching to students’ needs.

What has teaching military officers at West Point taught you about working with adult learners in general?

I codirect the Eisenhower Leader Development Program, a program jointly offered at Teachers College and West Point. We’re training Army officers to be mentors to West Point cadets. It has been the most amazing experience of my career. The students in the Eisenhower program study traditional college student theory and also adult learning theory. They’re reflecting on their own lives and experiences and projecting onto being mentors. These students have been leaders in combat and have had multiple deployments. Recently, we were talking about spiritual development, looking at the theory and national research. The question I asked was, What are the kinds of questions that came up when you were leading your platoon? We’re not talking isolated, interesting parables—we’re talking unbelievable real stuff. That’s the magic of adult learning. If we can harness and respect that and pull it out, there is nothing that matches their life experience in terms of relevance. What adult learners demand of us is that we take into account real experiences, and we try to match the knowledge base we have with the context of their real experience. We must refuse the dichotomy between intellectual learning and real life. That’s really the core—for all students.

How has the explosion in distance learning affected adult education?

One thing I often think about in this area is the work AAC&U has done with its surveys of what employers want from college graduates, and what employers rely on as accurate assessment. They all rely on significant degrees of engagement. They said test scores were of low importance, and supervised experiential learning opportunities were at the top of their lists. Online universities and non-credit-granting online training programs don’t provide the engaged high-impact practices that really matter. There’s a difference between having a certificate that reflects a number of hours and a degree or a program that reflects engaged, process-reflective learning. The best programs for adults do that.

One of the challenges in higher education is asking what it means to be thirty-eight and coming back to school. It means asking the fundamental question of who is the student. Answering that question demands changes in pedagogy, scheduling, and other areas—instrumental changes that need to happen on the part of the academy. Here’s my fear: Traditional education has been slow in its response, so the online universities have stepped in. They’re seemingly filling access gaps, but they have not provided any of the intellectual or academic high-impact practices. We haven’t been responsive, and these organizations are appearing to be responsive—but are not providing education. It’s incredibly frustrating. I live every day seeing what it’s like to design programs for adult learners and how effective they are. It’s just not true that you can get a university degree in your pajamas.

You’ve mentioned K. Patricia Cross’s work. A search of the research on adult learning brings up her name most frequently. Why is her writing on adult learning—much of it from the 1970s and 1980s—still so relevant?

It has staying power because she was the first to look at these issues. That’s a hallmark of her career. The first thing she did was call our attention to adult students in a literal way. Almost all the literature about college student development was written about traditional-age students. But Pat said, You know, there are some other folks on campus. The second thing is that she wrote so cogently and clearly about who these students were. It made you go, yes! The third thing is that every one of her books has implications for practice, so beyond describing populations, there were implications for responses. She was unbelievably intellectually deft, and incredibly practical. You can’t beat the combination. She did this for first-generation learners and assessment too. She zeroed in on critical issues and made those issues accessible to the larger higher education community in a way that allowed us to understand. She has always been ahead of the field.

What do you see as the future of adult education? What’s coming next?

One of the key upcoming issues in adult learning is tailored programs. There is a proliferation of specially designed degree programs. Traditional degree completers might want to simply finish what they started, but the new horizon is tailored degrees for people who want education in something like intercultural issues or leadership. This is happening at all levels—undergraduate, graduate, professional. Increasingly, adult learning in America has to do with people seeking specific professional degrees.

Teachers College has been designing an executive degree program in leadership and learning. We’re looking for people who have ten to fifteen years experience in their organizations to come get an advanced degree with the adaptation for twenty-first-century educational outcomes.

REFERENCE

St. Catherine University’s Weekend College: Open Doors, Open Minds, Open Weekends

Julie Michener, media and public relations manager, St. Catherine University
Amy Lindgren, president, Prototype Career Service; alumna, St. Catherine University
Greg Steenson, associate dean of admissions and market development, St. Catherine University
Joan Robertson, director of Weekend College, St. Catherine University

St. Catherine University (St. Kate’s) admissions leaders like to share the chapters of the school’s mythology that capture prospective students’ imagination and transform them into incoming students. One such story is the construction of Mendel Hall in 1927. At the time, it was a radical idea for a women’s college to have an entire building dedicated to the sciences, and it is a testament to the foresight and willpower of first president Antonia McHugh. Not only did she secure a $100,000 Rockefeller grant for construction, but thwarted St. Paul city fathers’ plans to extend Prior Avenue through campus by placing Mendel squarely in its path.

St. Kate’s staff and faculty also are quick to reference how they’re figuratively and literally standing on a foundation built on the achievements of Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet (CSJ), the college founders—women who were undaunted by difficulty and bold in their dreams for the education of women. The Weekend College—from its creation in 1979 to today—is immersed in this mythology even as leaders re-imagine it for this new millennium.

UNTAPPED TALENT EQUALS UNTAPPED OPPORTUNITY
St. Kate’s sixth president, Sister Alberta Huber, CSJ, who served from 1964 to 1979, was a pioneer who welcomed change—a valuable trait during the turbulent 1960s and ’70s. During that era, women redefined themselves both inside and outside the home, and St. Kate’s responded to the times with new majors, continuing education programs, and new buildings. Sister Alberta was aware that many women had never been able to attend college or had to drop out before completing their degree. At that time, statistics in Minnesota showed that only 7 percent of women had earned a degree beyond high school.

“I see that as a great need for the whole nation—an immense resource of talent that’s left untapped, and we have a lot to give them,” Sister Alberta said in the institutional history, More Than a Dream, published in 1992. In 1977, during strategic planning for St. Kate’s, Sister Alberta queried the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet about a weekend program to draw these adult learners. Her memo, set forth in her elegant cursive handwriting, set the wheels in motion: “What are the possibilities of a weekend college here? Commuters only—on Saturdays—for one or two specific programs? Degree programs? Non-degree programs?”

OPEN MINDS
With the mission to educate women, St. Kate’s had grown from a handful of students in its first year—1905—to nearly 2,000 by the late 70s. During the early 1970s, adults filled the institution's continuing education short courses and workshops to capacity. However, despite the success, faculty and staff were keenly aware of all that continuing education’s programs couldn’t offer to potential students. On-campus discussions about ways to serve these adult learners began to percolate.

Sister Alberta relied on Sister Therese Sherlock, the director of continuing education, for her knowledge about adult learners and their unique needs to help shape early discussions. Sister Therese’s recommendations called for a Weekend College model that would serve working adults and those living some distance away, create a sense of community, approximate the environment and experience of the “day” program for traditional-age students, and increase retention for nontraditional-AGED students.

In 1978, the president charged a task force with exploring
the possibilities and challenges St. Kate’s would face in developing a weekend program for working adults, and with creating a plan that would outline the program’s structure and content.

**ACADEMIC QUALITY FOREMOST**

St. Catherine University Professor Emerita Catherine Lupori, a member of the task force and chair of the English department at the time, said the speed at which advocates were able to move was surprising. “There was a lot of talk in the faculty lounge about Weekend College,” she said. “We wanted to be the first college (in Minnesota) to offer it.” The task force worked quickly to give St. Kate’s the competitive edge. From an initial meeting in December 1978, the group presented its plan to the Educational Policies Committee in February 1979.

Although speed was a consideration, Lupori said the task force members refused to take shortcuts on academic quality and the commitment to the liberal arts in Weekend College.

“We were insistent that the same faculty teaching in the day program would be teaching in the weekend program to ensure quality and that students would be academically challenged,” she said. “That came up again and again.”

Early faculty support came from Sister Mary Thompson, an alumna and then chair of the chemistry department, who had earned advanced degrees and would become one of the first faculty members to teach in St. Kate’s Weekend College. “I believe firmly in this college as a college for the education of women and I believe we should continue to stress our concern for women’s education for the nontraditional fields,” Sister Mary reported in the St. Kate’s internal newsletter, Currents, in 1979. “This kind of weekend approach will provide for a group of women who cannot be reached in any other way.”

Sister Therese credited faculty members on the committee for giving the task force the credibility it would need to build faculty consensus. “We had highly respected faculty members on the task force; otherwise we would never have got off the ground,” she said. “I remember the meeting where the proposed curriculum was approved. We got a standing ovation from the faculty—unheard of!”

Sister Therese added that the appointment of alumna Mary Alice Muellerleile to lead Weekend College was an additional strategic move by Sister Alberta. A former member of the faculty, Muellerleile’s creativity and foresight engaged faculty in the new venture. “Mary Alice holds faculty in high esteem as the real center of the academic experience. Faculty knew that and trusted her,” Sister Therese said. “She is the kind of administrator who really serves faculty, and this worked well for Weekend College.”

Following the end of her tenure in 1982, St. Kate’s created the Mary Alice Muellerleile Student Leadership Award, which is presented to a Weekend College student for outstanding leadership and service to her peers and to the university.

**OPEN DOORS**

Launched in fall 1979, Weekend College offered four baccalaureate programs: business administration, promotional communications, social work, and theology with a religious education orientation. Classes met for three and a half hours every other weekend with independent study assignments outside of class. The academic year consisted of three fourteen-week terms scheduled early September through June. St. Kate’s had modest expectations for the first class, predicting no more than twenty students. So when 127 enthusiastic students showed up for classes on the first day, all involved knew they had found a way to reach adult learners.

Lupori vividly recalled the heady mood in the faculty lounge following the first day of classes. “I will never forget that exultation, that ‘high,’” she said. “We knew we had really tapped into something good.”

**HITTING THE TARGET MARKET**

As forecasted, all but four of the first student class worked outside the home. Ranging in age from 16 to 56, the women averaged a median five years since their last formal education experience. Five of the students were widows, sixty were married, thirty-nine were single and twenty were divorced. That initial group of students had a total of 201 children, two of whom were born during the first Weekend College term.

Six ambitious students took three courses while the remainder enrolled in one or two courses the first trimester. Company educational reimbursements supported fifty-six students; another twenty-four received financial aid. By spring, the number of enrolled students rose to 296. That early success attracted community support and increased faculty interest in teaching courses. By the end of the first year, an additional thirty-eight course were added, led by thirty-one additional faculty.
A three-year Otto Bremer Foundation grant to support faculty and staff development allowed St. Kate’s to conduct workshops on improving teaching strategies and learning outcomes in the weekend format. Weekend College students were also invited to share their learning experiences at these workshops to improve the program.

Once alone in the upper Midwest market, Weekend College now operates in a rapidly expanding and highly competitive national marketplace for the very desirable, adult nontraditional student. Based locally and nationally, for-profit and nonprofit institutions offer a variety of nontraditional formats for baccalaureate education and certificates.

ONGOING ASSESSMENT A PRIORITY
In the 1979–80 annual report, Weekend College Director Muerllerlie outlined goals for the program:
- attract students whose academic ability and performance compared favorably with day students
- integrate Weekend College into the institution as a whole
- ensure quality education by regular evaluation and assessment of students’ needs
- provide faculty and staff development
- ensure that Weekend College was financially self-sufficient

Her annual report also discussed the evaluation of courses and faculty that would drive the development of services and program expansion.

She noted that student evaluations of faculty and the coursework were very positive. High marks also went to faculty—86.7 percent of students rated their instructors “effective or unusually effective.” Faculty evaluations of students praised their intellectual capabilities, although faculty felt some were underprepared for the return to academic life. Both evaluations showed that both faculty and students thought that the amount of class time was less than what was needed to meet course objectives.

Muerllerlie concluded that the mix of coursework at the 100, 200, and 300 levels would need to be reconsidered with increased academic advising. An administrative advisory group was formed in fall 1980 to ensure that weekend students had the resources they needed to succeed, including extended hours in the financial aid and registrar offices as well as the learning center and bookstore.

CONTROLLING THEIR CAREER TRAJECTORY
For students, Weekend College was the opportunity to control the pace of their education. A Weekend College alumna, journalist and career counselor Amy Lindgren, described the long-term effect her college experience had on her life. Writing for the university magazine, SCAN, in 2008, Lindgren—an undergraduate student in the ‘80s who juggled three jobs and her mother’s terminal illness—said Weekend College’s flexible schedule gave her the opportunity to focus.

Oddly, I remember the feeling of Weekend College more than the material we covered, the delicious sense that everyone in the classroom was as serious about each class as I was, and the absolute knowledge that I was in control of my own learning experience. That sense of control spread to other areas of my life and led me to start the company that I still operate today. When I give talks I sometimes say that I opened my business while I was in college, which, while technically true, is somewhat misleading. Yes, I was still a student, but I was very much in the world, thanks to class scheduling that made such a thing possible.

With the formation of the Weekend College Student Advisory Board in 1987, students were able to more directly address their needs to administrators. In addition to addressing concerns, the board also organizes hospitality events, distributes developmental grants for students to attend conferences or other professional development opportunities, works with the Access and Success program to serve students who are parents, and collaborates with alumnae and the development staff to help Weekend College students become more involved as alumnae.

UNIQUE FORMAT, UNIQUE CHALLENGES
During the 1980s, Weekend College expanded to enroll more than five hundred students. The number of courses offered soared from 99 to 170, and programs in several areas—including art, music, philosophy, physics, finance, and economics—were expanded or tested. Occupational therapy and information management ranked with business administration and communications as the top programs attracting students.

Workshops continued to help faculty grapple with presenting curriculum in the weekend format, mindful that the format presented unique curriculum
face-to-face time in class is very important other class experience. Managing the introduction to engineering is unlike any who added, “For some students, the activities are so time-intensive,” said Ng, a-half hours because the engineering classes instead of the standard three-and subjects. “We had to lobby for five-hour engineering, and mathematics (STEM) tactics for teaching science, technology, students translate what they’ve learned science principles and classroom techniques, pedagogy discussions. After learning sci- concepts and classroom activities with education majors.

The class combines engineering concepts and classroom activities with pedagogy discussions. After learning science principles and classroom techniques, students translate what they’ve learned into elementary classroom strategies and tactics for teaching science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) subjects. “We had to lobby for five-hour classes instead of the standard three-and-a-half hours because the engineering activities are so time-intensive,” said Ng, who added, “For some students, the introduction to engineering is unlike any other class experience. Managing the face-to-face time in class is very important because of the dialogue necessary to help students feel comfortable with the hands-on engineering activities.”

The Ng–Maxfield team is also exploring Skype and other online tools to create Thompson’s chemistry bucket in a virtual environment. Currently they utilize the university’s Blackboard platform to videotape class lectures so that students can review the content as many times as they need and on their own time. But Ng acknowledges that dialogue is still at the heart of the Weekend College experience. “Discussion is still important,” said Ng. “We will often start an activity in class and have students take it home to finish. Or we’ll work on techniques in class and then have them build something on their own to practice those techniques.”

QUALITY HINGES ON FACULTY
Faculty evaluations and course assessments support a culture of quality teaching and continuous curriculum improvement. Honored and rewarded for their dedication to students, faculty at St. Kate’s are committed and accomplished mentors and scholars and are critical to Weekend College student retention. “They make you feel important, and they encourage you to work hard, keep going, and get it done,” said Cheryl Kohls, a business administration major. “Even though I have not yet gotten my business degree, management at my place of employment recognizes that I am working toward it. I have gotten three promotions since I started at St. Kate’s. I believe my bosses are aware I’ve been taking courses that have an immediate impact on my career. Communication courses have greatly helped me improve my writing and speaking skills. Leadership is always brought up in every course that I’ve taken, even Women’s History. (‘If they could overcome all of their obstacles, so can you!’). I believe that my career will continue to move forward as long as I keep working toward my degree.”

“The professors have been amazing. I haven’t had one who doesn’t appear to take a very serious interest in me,” said Angela Rosendahl, a current St. Kate’s elementary education major. “I have been able to realize dreams that three years ago weren’t even known to me.” Rosendahl discovered a love of biology that led her to participate in a field study experience at the Heath and Marjorie Angelo Coast Range Reserve Project in northern California during summer 2010.

“My research experience, the STEM program and Dr. (Tony) Murphy and Dr. (Jill) Welter have made me see what I am capable of doing. My confidence has soared tremendously,” Rosendahl said. “I am doing everything I planned and more.”

NEW MILLENNIUM, NEW CHALLENGES
In 2010, St. Catherine University’s Weekend College offerings have grown to nineteen majors, ten minors, and four certificate programs. During weekend sessions, parking is at a premium and the campus bustles with students attending to appointments in university administrative offices, working on computers in the library and learning center, or participating in the student advisory board or other activities.

St. Kate’s Weekend College’s highest enrollment was in 2000 at 954; in 2010, 776 students enrolled. Once alone in the upper Midwest market, Weekend College now operates in a rapidly expanding and highly competitive national marketplace for the very desirable, adult nontraditional student. Based locally and nationally, for-profit and nonprofit institutions offer a variety of nontraditional formats for baccalaureate education and certificates. These players offer a wide range of scheduling, semester, and delivery formats, along with competitive tuition and liberal transfer policies, including well-defined
articulation agreements with community and technical colleges.

FROM COLLEGE TO UNIVERSITY
Over the past three years, St. Kate’s master academic reorganization created an integrated university comprising four schools and three colleges with a women’s liberal arts college at its heart. The College of St. Catherine also became St. Catherine University in June 2009, reflecting the institution’s complexity and growth.

This transformation, as well as the market pressures that have affected higher education as a whole, have provided the impetus for Weekend College leaders to reenvision Weekend College and consider a variety of options, including weekday evening classes, online courses or hybrid online/on-campus courses, as well as accelerated programs and professional certificates.

“Our vision is to become the first place professional women go to for their ongoing professional development and lifelong learning,” said Joan Robertson, director of Weekend College. “We want to expand the spectrum of adult learners at St. Kate’s, but we don’t want to lose our core audience: women who have never had the opportunity to attend college or finish their degree.”

STUDENT SURVEY LIGHTS THE PATH TO THE FUTURE
A Weekend College student survey conducted in late 2009 has provided administrators and faculty with insights into what students value about their educational experience and what they’d change. More than 72 percent of Weekend College students surveyed reported they would register for courses offered on weeknights in addition to the weekend schedule. Students were also clear in their preferences for class delivery. Blended courses that included both online and on-campus classes were preferred over fully online courses in both major fields of study and the liberal arts core curriculum.

“The survey confirms what we know attracts students to St. Kate’s. It’s not a siloed experience. It’s about community,” Robertson said. “The results also reinforce what we know about the way women learn best—as part of a community. We see technology as an important component of educational support, but not the primary mechanism for teaching and learning.”

Robertson also said that the liberal arts core curriculum—which brings together students from across majors—is essential to fostering community because the courses develop students’ critical thinking and communication skills. “I tell students: ‘You have not come here to get a watered-down education!’”

As St. Kate’s staff and faculty complete an intense process of reimagining and transforming the program into its twenty-first-century iteration, Robertson affirms that the vision Sister Alberta and her contemporaries had for the St. Catherine University Weekend College—to provide access to higher education to adult learners not served by traditional means—is still central to the university’s mission.

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AAC&U MEETINGS

NETWORK MEETINGS

EDUCATING FOR PERSONAL AND SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY: A Twenty-First-Century Imperative
October 13–15, 2011
Long Beach, California

ARTS & HUMANITIES:
Toward a Flourishing State?
November 3–5, 2011
Providence, Rhode Island

SUMMER INSTITUTES

INSTITUTE ON GENERAL EDUCATION AND ASSESSMENT
June 4–8, 2011
San José State University, California

INSTITUTE ON HIGH-ImpACT PRACTICES AND STUDENT SUCCESS
June 14–18, 2011
The University of Vermont

ENGAGING DEPARTMENTS INSTITUTE
July 13–17, 2011
Ellicott City, Maryland

www.aacu.org/meetings
As we conclude close to a decade of involvement in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, colleges and universities are experiencing a steady increase in the enrollment of student veterans. As a result, many institutions have developed specific programs and services designed to enhance veteran success in higher education. However, recent data from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) show that only a small percentage of veterans use all of their federal education benefits; the federal government does not track veteran retention or completion rates. Some institutions of higher education have created comprehensive evaluation plans to determine the measurable outcomes of their programs, but currently most measures of success for veteran-specific programs and services are anecdotal and qualitative.

Although additional research is necessary before certain practices can be deemed “best” practices, one thing is clear: the recently enacted post-9/11 GI Bill is an incredibly attractive benefit for service members, veterans and their families, and we should anticipate that these populations will only continue to increase on our campuses over the next several years.

**IMPORTANCE OF THE GI BILL**

The passage of the Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008 (commonly referred to as the Post-9/11 GI Bill) was the most significant increase in education benefits for service members and veterans since the original GI Bill of 1944—the benefit that is frequently credited with establishing the foundation of today’s middle class. The original GI Bill was responsible for educating millions of scientists, doctors, engineers, businessmen, authors, actors, and teachers, while providing vocational training for millions more. The Post-9/11 GI Bill is designed to provide a similar higher education incentive for more than two million service members who have served since September 11, 2001.

The Post-9/11 GI Bill is designed to cover tuition and fees for in-state public undergraduate higher education for eligible veterans. For private institutions, graduate education, and out-of-state tuition, institutions may enter into an agreement with the VA whereby the VA will match institutional contributions to cover additional costs. The Post-9/11 GI Bill also provides a monthly housing stipend and an annual book stipend. Legislation passed in late 2010 expanded eligibility for the benefit to an additional 85,000 members of the National Guard and reserves and enhanced the applicability of the benefit to vocational training.

In its first year of implementation, more than half a million veterans applied for certificates of eligibility for the Post-9/11 GI Bill, and more than 300,000 veterans and family members used the benefit to attend classes (Steele, Salcedo, and Coley 2010). As the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan draw down and ramp up respectively, institutions will continue to encounter the potential for a significant increase of veterans on campus for many years. Veterans can bring with them a wealth of knowledge about living abroad, as well as deep personal experience with innovation, accountability, and responsibility. The influx of veterans into our institutions provides new opportunities for the enrichment of classroom discussions and the enhancement of campus diversity.

Many institutions—ready and willing to help these students successfully transition back into civilian life—are enthusiastic and welcoming, but aren’t always sure how to meet veterans’ needs, which are distinct from those of other students. What effective programmatic elements have institutions of higher education put in place to meet these needs? How can higher education best serve this deserving population of young, returning veterans?

**THE CHARACTERISTICS OF VETERANS**

Veterans are, by definition, nontraditional students. They are typically older and many are technically considered transfer students because they often bring with them credit earned through college courses they completed while in the military, or American Council on Education credit recommendations. While some veterans view college as an obligatory box to be checked to enhance prospects for gainful employment after military service, other veterans embrace the opportunity to immerse themselves in the traditional college experience.
Some additional statistics can help shed light on the characteristics of recent military veterans:

- In 2007–08, active-duty and veteran students represented 4 percent of all undergraduates enrolled in postsecondary education (Radford 2009).
- Forty-three percent of students with military experience attended public two-year institutions, 21 percent attended public four-year institutions, 12 percent enrolled in private nonprofit institutions, and 12 percent enrolled in private for-profit institutions (Radford 2009).
- Veterans tend to be older and are more likely to be non-white than traditional college students (Radford 2009).
- Women currently make up nearly 15 percent of the military and are a rapidly growing segment of the veteran population (Business and Professional Women Foundation 2007); 27 percent of students with military experience are women (Radford 2009).

- Of the 2.2 million troops who have deployed in support of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, more than 800,000 have deployed multiple times (Department of Defense 2009). A recent RAND Corporation report states that between 14 and 19 percent of those who have deployed have developed symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, traumatic brain injury, and/or depression (Tanielian and Jaycox 2008).

In a recent effort to illuminate the landscape of existing programs and services for veterans at institutions of higher education, the American Council on Education teamed up with four other higher education associations to administer a national survey. More than seven hundred colleges and universities responded, detailing veteran-specific programs and services (or lack thereof) at their institutions. A sample of responses follows (Cook and Kim 2009):

- More than half of respondent institutions (57 percent) currently provide programs and services specifically designed for service members and veterans, and nearly 60 percent of respondents indicated that such programs and services for military service members and veterans are part of their institution’s long-term strategic plan.
- Public four-year (74 percent) and public two-year (66 percent) institutions are more likely to have programs specifically designed for military veterans than private nonprofit colleges and universities (36 percent).
- Fewer than half of all schools with military and/or veterans programs offer opportunities for faculty and administrators to acquire information about the unique needs of military student populations, existing campus resources, and promising practices to create a positive campus environment.

**SPECIFIC NEEDS OF RETURNING VETERANS**

Through roundtables, conferences, focus groups, and interviews, student veterans have voiced unique needs compared to traditional undergraduates. Because veterans are a diverse population with an incredibly wide range of experiences, it is impossible to take a one-size-fits-all approach to serving them. Thus, one of the most important steps that campus leadership can take is to gauge the specific needs of veterans at their institution before devoting resources to new initiatives. Both student veterans and campus administrators have spoken to the success of efforts that have been crafted with direct input from the enrolled student veteran population and have emphasized this is the best approach to designing supportive programs.

However, it can be very difficult to solicit input when there is no method to track or contact student veterans. Many institutions have revised admissions forms to include a mechanism to track incoming students with military experience and have followed up with these individuals as they make their way to classes. This system not only allows institutions to track veterans’ success as they progress through academic programs, but also enables the institution to measure the effectiveness of resources and to quickly and easily reach out to veterans on campus.

Despite the differences among individual veterans, several themes have emerged. The following recommendations have been implemented by many institutions to help ensure veterans are successful in higher education, and have received a great deal of positive feedback from students:

- Establish specific points of contact within campus offices.
- Create a campus working group that spans departments.
- Collaborate with community organizations to provide comprehensive services.
- Ensure veterans receive a thorough introduction to the university through an orientation.
- Improve campus climate by establishing a student veterans group, educating faculty and staff about veteran-specific issues, and if possible, creating a veteran-specific resource center or designated space.
- Investigate the possibility of creating veteran-specific learning communities on campus.
- Streamline disability and veterans services.

**Establishing specific points of contact: Mitigating the culture shock**

One of the biggest frustrations voiced by veterans is the daunting and unfamiliar bureaucracy of higher education. While the military is also an enormously complex bureaucracy, information about how to navigate it is ingrained in troops through specific training from the beginning of their military careers. Many veterans have spoken to the sense of alienation they feel upon beginning class and often allude to feeling confused and overwhelmed during
their first terms because they aren’t sure where to turn for assistance.

This can be most easily mitigated by having specific points of contact within college or university offices, such as the registrar, admissions, financial aid, academic advising, career center, student health, counseling, housing, and disability services. Ideally, these liaisons become well-versed in both on- and off-campus resources within their areas of expertise and can greatly reduce frustration for the veteran.

One institution that has instituted designated veteran liaisons in campus offices is the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). Prominently placed on UCLA’s veterans Web page, the “Veterans Resource Team” tab provides contact information for each team member, including photo, title, and location. The simple step of having a single point of contact within each office allows veterans to make just one phone call or schedule just one meeting, and also recognizes that veterans may have slightly different or more complex needs than traditional undergraduates.

Creating a campus working group: Streamlining communication

Again, the frustrations of many veterans can be alleviated by cross-campus communication and teamwork. If an institution lacks the resources to develop a robust initiative, a big influence can be made by creating a working group to evaluate the current climate at the institution and identify short- and long-term improvements. Ideally, the working group would consist of both high-level campus officials and currently enrolled student veterans and would meet on a regular basis.

Fairleigh Dickinson University, a private institution in New Jersey, created an interdepartmental veterans education task force committee to analyze and evaluate the university’s policies, practices, and procedures. Created at the president’s directive and strongly supported by his office, the team consisted of administration and faculty across departments and was divided into four subcommittees: academic policies and procedures, psychological services, campus and community reintegration, and administrative processes and systems. The committee found the institution was strong in some areas but needed improvement in others.

As a result, the task force came up with thirty-two short- and long-term recommendations and drafted a report to the president. After the creation of the report, the task force shifted to a permanent advisory committee. The advisory committee meets monthly and has representation from high-level campus officials, such as the dean of students, director of psychological services, and director of the veterans office, in addition to student representatives.

Taking a community-based approach: When resources are stretched thin

In today’s economic climate, it can be difficult for institutions to develop new programs and services for a particular student population. However, the ongoing conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan have resulted in a proliferation of veteran-centered resources, services, and programs offered by both government and private-sector providers, many of which are based within local communities. Some veterans will be arriving on campus with service-connected disabilities, such as post-traumatic stress disorder, traumatic brain injury, depression, and hearing and vision loss. Many campuses have successfully partnered with local VA facilities, veterans service organizations, and nonprofits to bring their expertise and services directly to campus.

A unique example of a public college/private sector partnership can be found in Massachusetts. Mount Wachusett Community College, a rural campus with about 4,000 students, leased ten acres of land to the nonprofit organization, Veteran Homestead, Inc., for the purpose of constructing a rehabilitation center for severely injured veterans. Located adjacent to campus buildings, the center provides state-of-the-art equipment for recovery from amputations, traumatic brain injury, and burns while allowing families to live together in duplexes. In return for the leased land, the rehabilitation center provides internship opportunities for students in the nursing and allied health programs.

Ensuring veterans receive an introduction to the institution

Many veterans do not transition out of the military in time to attend traditional orientation sessions, which often take place several weeks before a term begins. They may miss the basic introduction to the campus and resources that other incoming students receive, and this can result in feelings of disorientation from the outset. Veterans also require specific information on benefits and other resources, which is not typically included in the orientation for incoming students. In order to meet this need, some institutions have created short break-out sessions for veterans, in addition to the regular transfer and freshman orientation program.

The George Washington University found that having a separate, short orientation program held on a midweek evening early in the semester worked best for student veterans. This targeted program gave veterans easy access to benefits information, allowed them to meet campus administration and one another, and gave them insight into helpful campus resources in an intimate, face-to-face setting.

Veteran-specific learning communities: Built-in support

Some returning veterans cite frustration with younger classmates and find close relationships with other student veterans to be extremely helpful. Several institutions have designed veteran-specific classes to foster these relationships and enhance veteran success. These courses range from
noncredit introductory courses to full-credit general education classes. While a sense of community and identity for student veterans has many positive effects on student performance, isolation from the broader campus population is not the intent of these cohort classes.

John Schupp, a former professor at Cleveland State University, created the SERV (Supportive Education for the Retuning Veteran) Program after realizing that many veterans were not successfully transitioning into and through higher education. The SERV Program is a cohort-based learning community model where general education courses (such as English, psychology, and sociology) are offered as “veterans-only” courses. Veterans can opt into the classes, which stress the smooth transition out of the veterans-only classes into “regular” classes as a defining measure of success. Veteran-only SERV classes are currently offered at the University of Arizona, Kent State University, Youngstown State University, and the University of Akron.

Improving campus climate: Helping smooth the transition

Despite having an enrollment of fewer than one hundred student veterans, the University of California, Santa Cruz (UCSC) Services for Transfer and Re-Entry Students (STARS) Office recognized that student veterans were dealing with unique issues. Beginning with seed money from a fundraising event, UCSC created a sustainable peer mentorship program. The program is facilitated by a student veteran coordinator and a handful of peer mentors, all of whom go through a selection process and receive extensive training on general campus, community, and veteran-specific resources.

The STARS Office director oversees the program, and each incoming student veteran has access to the peer mentors. Since its inception, the mentorship program has increased its reach beyond accepted students to potential student veterans, and also educates students, administration, and faculty on the experiences of student veterans. The program has an office for student veterans, which fosters a supportive peer environment and allows for convenient access to services such as academic advising, social events, general transition assistance, and benefits counseling. A significant aspect of the program includes working relationships with campus and community resources: the team of both student and professional staff members works in collaboration with academic and student service partners, government agencies, local veterans groups, and regional community college contacts.

Veterans with disabilities: Navigating language barriers

In a recent online brainstorming event centered on veterans in higher education, participants discussed the disconnect that exists for many veterans grappling with service-connected injuries or disabilities and the related terminology. For example, several veterans explained that while they identified with the term “wounded,” they did not identify with the term “disabled.” This may be because their disability was acquired later in life or because their injuries are invisible or undiagnosed.

Incoming student veterans also may not be familiar with disability terminology in a higher education setting. For example, the phrase “having a disability” can be confusing for a veteran who may indeed have a disability, but who has not gone through the VA’s disability rating process. As a result, while a veteran may have documentation proving eligibility for accommodations or assistive devices, the terminology may be confusing and he or she may not seek assistance. It is also beneficial for college administrators to understand that not all injuries are incurred in combat, and this may be a point of self-consciousness or even shame for some.

Operation College Promise, a veterans’ education initiative created by the New Jersey Association of State Colleges and Universities, has partnered with the War Related Illness and Injury Study Center (WRIISC) in an effort to enhance understanding of veterans with disabilities. WRIISC provides presentations and webinars on post-traumatic stress disorder and other combat-related injuries to faculty, staff, and other interested parties in the community.

CONCLUSION

Legislative enhancements to the Post-9/11 GI Bill passed in December 2010 will expand benefits to service members and veterans previously excluded. As these veterans arrive on our campuses, they will continue to look to administration, faculty, and other student veterans for support. Fortunately, an abundance of government and private nonprofit resources are designed to help facilitate the transition out of military service into civilian life, and higher education institutions can best serve this unique student population by supplementing existing campus programs and services with veteran-specific resources.

REFERENCES


Planning to Succeed: Meeting the Needs of Adult Students Today

Greg von Lehman, provost, University of Maryland University College

It is no secret that the landscape of higher education is changing. In 1996, the National Center for Education Statistics estimated that more than 60 percent of students in US higher education met some or all of the criteria that would classify them as “non-traditional”—for instance, having delayed enrollment into post-secondary education, attending school part time, being financially independent of their parents, working full time while enrolled, having dependents other than a spouse, being a single parent, or lacking a standard high school diploma. Today, the numbers are even higher.

Many members of this growing demographic are adults who return to school, juggling the competing demands of jobs, families, and military or community responsibilities. They come to the classroom singularly focused and goal oriented, with specific outcomes in mind. Success, for them, may mean something different than it does for their younger, “traditional” counterparts. It may mean realizing the dream of graduating from college—after first postponing that dream for a decade or more. It may also mean entering a more lucrative or secure career field, completing a credential that is needed for advancement, or securing a brighter future for their children.

As provost of University of Maryland University College (UMUC), I enjoy a unique vantage point from which to observe and assess this shifting landscape. For more than sixty years, UMUC has embraced a unifying mission—that of providing quality educational opportunities to adult students in Maryland, across the country, and around the world. In that time, we have learned some valuable lessons by carefully attending to student feedback and educational outcomes.

PART-TIME STUDENTS REQUIRE A FULL-TIME COMMITMENT

If there is one universal truth about adult higher education, it is that serving adult students—and by that I mean partnering with them fully so that they have the greatest opportunity for success—takes more than a casual commitment. For an institution to truly succeed, its mission must inform all aspects of its operations, from its course delivery formats and scheduling to its curriculum, resources, student services, and more.

SUCCESS IS EVERYTHING

[Success] may mean realizing the dream of graduating from college—after first postponing that dream for a decade or more. It may also mean entering a more lucrative or secure career field, completing a credential that is needed for advancement, or securing a brighter future for their children.

Common features of a more traditional campus—a required class that meets three mornings a week, for instance; a financial aid office that is only open from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.; an on-campus library that closes at 10 p.m.—can present insurmountable obstacles to a student with children and a full-time job.

ACCESS IS EVERYTHING

At UMUC, that realization has guided the university’s evolution across eight decades, and continues to do so today. Our online presence and worldwide footprint alone stand as a testimony to that fact, because—for adult students—it isn’t enough to know which degree they hope to earn and which courses they must com-
plete to earn it. They must also be able to access those courses at times and places that fit their busy lives and schedules.

At UMUC, we have experimented with a variety of schedules and delivery methods over the decades—everything from old-fashioned “correspondence courses” to lectures delivered by closed-circuit television, voicemail, or e-mail. Our face-to-face courses are typically offered in the evening or on weekends, meeting either once a week or several times on an accelerated schedule, and at locations that are situated conveniently along commuter routes, on military bases, and near suburban centers.

Of course, with the advent of the Internet, online education has surged to an overwhelming level of popularity with adult students, and that is no surprise. Not only does online education offer unprecedented access, but—as explored in a recent meta-analysis by the US Department of Education—learning outcomes in online classrooms compare very favorably to those in traditional, face-to-face settings. At UMUC, a full 95 percent of our stateside students take at least one course online each year, with the university offering thirty-two undergraduate degrees and seventeen graduate degrees completely online.

Equally important, though, is how we have chosen to deliver classes online. While we are, on many levels, a high-tech university, we don’t chase the latest technological fads. Instead, we wait to integrate the latest technologies so as not to exclude those who don’t have access to the most powerful personal computers, the fastest Internet connections, or the latest software.

For similar reasons, our online courses are delivered asynchronously, which means that students need not be online at the same time as the instructor, teaching assistant, or fellow students. That allows an active-duty soldier stationed overseas to sign on late in the evening, if necessary, while a working parent can use his or her lunch hour to view online presentations, complete assignments, and participate in threaded online discussions, and perhaps sign on after work to review comments from classmates and feedback from the instructor.

GIVING CREDIT WHERE CREDIT IS DUE

Once adult students choose an institution and course of study, their next hurdle often involves determining exactly where they stand in terms of educational progress, and what coursework they will need to reach their education goals.

The typical UMUC student comes to the university after having attended five or other postsecondary institutions, and 54 percent of students new to UMUC have already earned sixty credits. More than half transfer in after first attending a community college; often, they have been away from the classroom for some time. This is common of all adult students, and even if they have attended college in the past, they may not have declared a major, or they may have chosen courses haphazardly and interrupted their studies because they ran out of money, had to change jobs, joined the military and were deployed, had to attend to the birth of a child, or for any of a dozen other reasons.

What that means, of course—both for UMUC students and for adult students in general—is that “going back to school” often involves building on an earlier, incomplete foundation rather than starting from scratch. Nonetheless, some institutions refuse to accept transfer credit altogether, and many others rely on an outdated process that can take months to evaluate and transfer credit from other schools.

For adult students, that delay in transferring credits can come at a disastrous cost. They may waste tuition dollars paying for classes that are redundant, choose to postpone studies when time is of the essence, or enroll in classes that are beyond their level of preparation and—as a consequence—risk failure, discouragement, and additional (and unnecessary) expense.

With that in mind, UMUC has implemented an award-winning credit transfer system, which offers another example of how an institution focused on adult education is shaped, top to bottom, by the demands of its students. Our relatively new and still evolving system combines a large and growing database of more than 600,000 preevaluated courses from other accredited institutions with a document management system, workflows, and business processes involving faculty to streamline the evaluation of new transfer credit.

As a result, students can now determine very quickly how many credits they can transfer to UMUC and where they stand in their progress toward a degree. The system has helped reduce the wait time for transcript evaluations from several months to less than forty-eight hours and won a Leadership Recognition Award in 2010 from the IMS Global Learning Consortium, which works to advance technology that can affordably expand and improve educational participation and attainment. (In 2008, it also earned UMUC President Susan C. Aldridge a special invitation from the US Department of Education to showcase the system at the agency’s national summit in Chicago.)

But adults bring more than “book learning” to the classroom, and granting credit for college-level learning earned outside the classroom—on the job, in the military, working as a volunteer, or elsewhere—is also vital to meeting the needs of adult students. To me, it makes little sense that—upon returning to school—a successful entrepreneur would be
required to study the rudiments of business management, or a seasoned military officer would be expected to revisit the basics of leadership or communication.

With that in mind, UMUC’s Prior Learning program is an established component of our curricular framework, allowing students to enroll in a structured program in which, under the guidance of a faculty member, they develop a detailed portfolio describing and demonstrating their competence in a given field or discipline. We follow the principles established by the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL), and while it is a challenging and time-consuming process, both for the student who develops the portfolio and the faculty member who reviews and evaluates it, Prior Learning program participation can ultimately yield as many as thirty credits that represent a dramatic savings for the student, both in terms of time to degree and reduced tuition. (The average number of credits awarded per student as a result of this process is about eighteen.)

**SUPPORT AND RESOURCES READILY AT HAND**

While most adult students are accurately described as mature and motivated, it is also true that they often return to the classroom after an extended absence, unsure of their own capacity or preparation for college-level coursework. That very lack of confidence can represent an obstacle, and it is vital that an infrastructure of support and resources be readily available. In fact, adult students—when compared to their younger counterparts—are often less likely to ask for help when they need it most, concerned that they not be seen as unintelligent or unprepared, and it sometimes falls to the institution to provide necessary support before a student requests it.

At UMUC, we spend considerable time assessing student preparedness for college-level work, and we intervene early and aggressively if we determine that a student either lacks the recommended preliminary coursework or is failing to participate or contribute satisfactorily in a course. In addition, our internal research shows that we can positively affect both student persistence and student success with several other relatively simple approaches.

First, we offer UMUC 411—a free, weeklong orientation to online education that allows prospective students to familiarize themselves with WebTycho, our proprietary learning management system; to ask questions of UMUC faculty staff, alumni, and other prospective students; to submit practice assignments; to chat with Career Services, Library Services, and financial aid representatives; and to learn more about the MyUMUC student portal, through which they can easily track and manage their personal, financial, and academic records online.

Next, after they enroll, all undergraduate students are strongly encouraged and most are required to take EDCP 100: Principles and Strategies of Successful Learning. For students who have been away from the classroom, the online environment—though easily accessible and resource rich—can sometimes be daunting to navigate. EDCP 100 is a carefully structured course that reviews college-level research and study skills and offers in-depth tours of the university environment as a whole and of the vast research and resource materials available through Information and Library Services.

We provide other means of support as well. UMUC’s Effective Writing Center is available online. Writing center staff does not (and should not) rewrite papers or assignments, but in most cases they do offer forty-eight-hour turnaround on paper reviews, and offer coaching and detailed feedback on assignments.

Through Information and Library Services, students enjoy instant access to tens of thousands of book and more than one hundred online databases, many offering full-text journal, magazine, and newspaper articles. The library is available online twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, skilled research librarians are on staff and on call, and innovative bibliographic guides are available on many research topics, pulling together many of the seminal works in a given field.

Finally, although adult students flock to online coursework because of its flexibility, our research shows that many still wish for the social and community connections they might build in a face-to-face environment.

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Finally, although adult students flock to online coursework because of its flexibility, our research shows that many still wish for the social and community connections they might build in a face-to-face environment. With that in mind, UMUC offers a variety of programs to help students build the relationships and networks that will support them and help them succeed, both as students and as alumni.

For example, we sponsor an alumni mentor program through our Alumni Association, and graduates of the university contact new students soon after they enroll in their first course, offering guidance, encouragement, and support. Similarly, we offer dozens of online clubs,
honor societies, and student associations where students can meet their peers and program directors, build relationships, take on leadership roles, and generally enrich their college experience.

FACULTY AND COURSEWORK TAILORED TO ADULT STUDENTS
Ultimately, of course, an educational institution is only as good as its faculty and curriculum, and at UMUC, we put significant resources into developing both. Teaching adult students—and teaching online—is different than teaching in a traditional, brick-and-mortar classroom, and all UMUC faculty undergo a mandatory five-week training program that familiarizes them with UMUC as a whole and with online teaching technologies and strategies. New faculty members are mentored by their more experienced peers, and their performance is monitored and assessed, based on our teaching expectations. Subsequent coaching can be arranged as necessary.

We also offer more than twenty online faculty development workshops, presenting a variety of topics related to online and adult education—everything from how to use Impatica (an application that allows Microsoft Powerpoint presentations to be played over the Internet, without plug-ins) to an overview of university policies and procedures, establishing standards of fair use, and learning to manage challenging students online. Faculty who complete the required coursework can earn a certificate in online education.

But student success isn’t only measured inside a classroom, and for adult students to truly succeed, an institution must offer a quality curriculum that delivers the learning outcomes that the workforce demands. It is not enough to simply adapt decades-old content for online delivery or an accelerated schedule.

At UMUC, courses are purposefully designed—learning objectives are expressed clearly, and readings and activities are carefully aligned and relevant, with constant input from workforce experts. Learning modules are designed that engage the student, and rather than relying on simple text exercises, they leverage the online environment and include simulations, exercises, and case studies with links to real-world events and results.

Our new master’s and bachelor’s degree programs in cybersecurity offer a relevant example. Designed in direct response to urgent workforce demand for trained professionals in a growing and vitally important field, UMUC developed a new curriculum with input and direct guidance from a committee of industry experts and thought-leaders from the highest ranks of business, government, and the military. And students who complete the program will graduate armed with the knowledge and skills necessary to enter leadership roles, ready to make an immediate impact in an exciting and dynamic field.

In short, they will be positioned to succeed—and that must be the ultimate goal of any institution that aims to serve the needs of adult students in the twenty-first century.
Adult Students: Meeting the Challenge of a Growing Student Population

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Over the past several years, community colleges across the country have experienced substantial growth in enrollment. The economic downturn and accompanying job loss, coupled with the relatively low cost of attending a community college, have made our institutions a primary destination for many students seeking to earn a degree and prepare for a career. In fact, according to the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC), full-time attendance at US community colleges increased 24.1 percent between fall 2007 and fall 2009. Although some of the growth can be attributed to traditional college students choosing to begin their postsecondary education at the community college level, adult student learners have returned to our campuses in remarkable numbers. The shifting demographics of our population have forced community colleges to reconsider both their offerings and their delivery methods to ensure adult student learners receive the educational options and the ancillary support they need to succeed.

In fall 2010, St. Louis Community College in St. Louis, Missouri, (STLCC) enrolled 12,161 students over the age of twenty-five. This number represents 41.8 percent of the entire student body and an increase of 27 percent over the percentage of adult student enrollment in 2007, just three years ago. Additionally, the majority of this student population is under the age of forty (68 percent), and most of these students (94 percent), have attended at least some college in the past. Clearly these students, still in the prime of their working careers, are seeking to enhance or even alter their career paths. Although their educational goals may coincide with those of the traditional learner, the challenges of the adult learner are often distinctive.

So just how does a college or university address the dualistic challenge of serving returning adult learners while keeping pace with contemporary needs of the more traditional college student? STLCC has created a set of services that helps adult students transition back into the collegiate environment, programs that offer the flexibility that adult student often require, and teaching techniques that align most clearly with Malcolm Knowles’ (1984) adult learning theory.

OVERCOMING INITIAL OBSTACLES

Even more so than their traditional-aged student counterparts, adult students return to college with an incredible diversity of educational and life experiences. Still, in many ways, the needs of these learners, as well as the obstacles they face, are universal. Returning adult learners come into the learning environment with reasonably clear educational goals accompanied by murky expectations of how the learning experience has changed since their last exposure. Often a critical factor for ensuring student success is minimizing the effect that the simple passage of time can play.

For example, student advisers often discover that many returning adult learners may only faintly remember where or why they ended their initial quest for a degree. Transcripts from earlier courses may be unavailable or in a state of disarray. Often we find that a student may have initially withdrawn from college during a period of personal crisis that is reflected by a less-than-stellar academic record. However, STLCC has instituted administrative procedures that provide appropriate opportunities for academic forgiveness or a subsequent adjustment to a student’s grade point average. These policies can level the playing field for returning students with the ambition, if not the academic record, of any traditional college student.

Even the most promising adult students may suffer from being away from the academic environment for a prolonged period...
of time. All adult learners returning to STLCC after a three-year absence are required to retake a placement test to assess their need to for developmental classes, unless they have completed related college-level courses at any time. In some cases, well-developed lifelong skills (such as reading and writing) allow students to enter college-level courses. However, students often need refresher courses in mathematics before entering college-level algebra.

Additionally, new teaching methods and technologies may pose a problem for some adult students. While technology has been interwoven into the learning fabric of our educational system for a decade or more, many adult students may be less computer-savvy than their traditional counterparts and less comfortable in online or hybrid classes. Some must upgrade their knowledge and skills, either informally or in a classroom setting, in order to reach their long-term educational goals.

STLCC’s Cornerstone class offers students a three-credit-hour course that introduces them to concepts of critical thinking, information management, and more, while encouraging proficiency in basic computer usage. This course is recommended for all incoming students, but has been an especially helpful primer for adult learners who have been removed from an academic environment for some time.

**CREATING OPTIMAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS**

Perhaps one of the more apparent differences between the adult learner and the traditional college student is that adult learners often present an exceptionally clear notion of what they are seeking from their institution. These students are also often more open to the many academic resources available to them than their traditional-aged peers.

Joanne R., a STLCC adult learner seeking an associate of arts degree before pursuing a bachelor’s degree in education, has taken advantage of every orientation, study session, and skill-building workshop offered at her campus. From “Learn and Earn” seminars where attendance is rewarded with a free lunch voucher to study sessions before finals, Joanne found the educational support system outside of the classroom nearly as instrumental to her success as a student as the coursework within.

Additionally, the growing diversity of educational delivery options available to all students—traditional and adult learner—has opened the door for students to learn on a faster track with a more personalized schedule. The inclusion of specialized training programs, once the exclusive territory of the proprietary career colleges, provides short-term, affordable training to students seeking a career change. STLCC offers a wide variety of employment-ready certificate and degree programs that students can complete in two years or fewer. Even students pursuing a traditional post-secondary education can take advantage of a growing number of evening and weekend courses that allow them to continue to work and care for a family while attending college.

**BRIDGING THE GENERATIONS**

Inevitably, adult learners attending community college find themselves in the classroom with traditional-aged college students. Although some find this disconcerting, the disconnect is typically more social than academic. By presenting topics that are both relevant and contemporary, educators can transcend the students’ chronological divide and provide a meaningful learning experience for all ages. Furthermore, many adult learners may know more than the instructor on certain topics, and may possess life experiences that can enrich the classroom as a whole. Thus, the classroom dynamics have changed, with the most successful educators tapping into adult students’ body of knowledge.

Developmentally, adult learners often engage in “generativity” (Erikson 1980), a process of sharing one’s accumulated knowledge for the betterment of others. When joined with “identity development,” a developmental stage of traditional college students (roughly sixteen to twenty-five years of age), the outcome seems ideal, and it often is. Adult learners are encouraged to enhance basic course content with anecdotes from the working world, which less experienced students find meaningful (Vella 2002). Overall, both communities of students benefit from their exposure to one another. To this point, STLCC student Joanne R. said, “I have different frame of reference from most of the students in the class, but the dynamics have been positive, and I have felt very valued by my instructors and fellow students.”

**ALP: A COMPREHENSIVE MODEL FOR ADULT LEARNERS**

The clearest example of how St. Louis Community College attempts to meet the needs of returning adult learners who are seeking a general transfer associate’s degree is the Accelerated Learning Program (ALP) offered at the Florissant Valley campus. Over its ten-year existence, the program has enrolled nearly three hundred adult learners.

The ALP program is based on the tenets of “learning community” theory, and it requires an approach that includes an interconnected cohort of faculty and students. The class meets just one evening each week, allowing students sufficient out-of-class time to balance school, work, and family commitments. Content instruction happens through self-directed learning and via the Internet. The once-per-week class meetings allow for the interdisciplinary tackling of “essential questions” posed by the thematic clustering of courses.
The curriculum is designed to be delivered in semester-long, thematic modules that are fully integrated in design and delivery, rather than utilizing the typical linked-course approach. Delivery of instruction is completely interdisciplinary, with shared instruction and team teaching. Typically there are three to four faculty members in the classroom at all times, collaboratively delivering instruction, with each guiding the students through the lens of his or her own discipline. The design of the curriculum is also meant to establish relevance of material for the students, a common desire of adult students as articulated in the adult learning literature, as well as discovered in our internal student assessment.

Educational technology provides each student with twenty-four-hour access to course content, electronic media, and one another. Tools such as blogs and discussion boards allow students to upload and respond to content in real time.

Students earn their degree in twenty months (nine semesters). However, the program requires that enrollees be reasonably autonomous and technologically sophisticated, two requirements that correlate well with the adult learners’ own “intrinsic motivations” to learn and “self-directedness” (Knowles, Swanson, and Holton 2005). The program’s technological complexity allows for a degree of autonomy that appeals to these learners. Our students routinely cite the learning community and the curriculum design as the primary reasons for their high levels of satisfaction and academic success in the Accelerated Learning Program.

A good deal of refinement has taken place over the life of the program. The most recent example has been the addition of a dedicated counselor to respond to the personal counseling needs that we’ve discovered are unique to adult students. The counselor helps streamline the process of registration and ongoing enrollment, providing a valuable service for time-stressed students. All faculty members who teach in the program willingly advise and counsel the students on an ongoing basis.

While ALP is the grandfather of the STLCC adult-learner programs, other options exist for returning students as well. The Forest Park campus offers a two-year degree program via a rotating schedule of classes, all occurring on Friday evenings, Saturdays, and Sundays. The Meramec campus offers a Saturday Flexible Learning program. It features a number of three- to five-credit-hour general education courses taught in an eight-week block schedule with class held on Saturday mornings and a web-based portion that can be completed as the student’s schedule permits. For many adult students with full-time jobs, the ability to attend college on the weekend is a key component to completing their education.

LOOKING AHEAD

Faced with the many positive attributes of the returning adult learner, colleges and universities must prepare to recruit and support this group. Institutions like St. Louis Community College understand that this type of preparation begins from the inside out with employee training and student services that are learner-centered and highly proactive. Programs that feature concepts like the Backward Design curriculum architecture of L. Dee Fink (2003) and the principles of adult learning theory highlighted in the writings of Jane Vella (2002) must be deeply infused into the academic culture.

Concurrent with those efforts must be initiatives that attract displaced and underemployed adult workers and transforms them into returning adult learners. Adult Information Sessions presented by STLCC’s Enrollment Management office allow interested adults to survey the wide array of degree and training programs the college has to offer—and the sessions focus on those programs that are most likely to interest returning adult learners. Attendees can also gather information on financial aid, speak with a counselor, or find out about program prerequisites or requirements.

In addition, a primary goal of all colleges with a growing number of adult student learners must be to ensure that these individuals have been primed for a second encounter with college. St. Louis Community College attempts to meet that challenge. Through proactive new student advisement and opportunities for placement in classes that are appropriate for adult students of all levels of achievement, STLCC is well-positioned to help our adult learners embrace the college experience and succeed in their long-term educational goals. As one of the leading institutions in Missouri with a mission of providing higher learning to a diverse audience, we plan to continue to serve as a pacesetter and innovator in adult education.

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Research on Adult Learners: Supporting the Needs of a Student Population that Is No Longer Nontraditional

Jovita M. Ross-Gordon, professor, department of leadership, counseling, adult education, and school psychology, Texas State University; and coeditor-in-chief, New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education sourcebook series

Adult students have been a growing presence on college campuses during recent decades and there are numerous indicators that these students, often referred to as "nontraditional," constitute a significant proportion of the undergraduate student body. National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) data indicate that 38 percent of the 2007 enrollment of more than eighteen million college students were twenty-five years of age or older (NCES 2009). NCES 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 decade (Hussar and Bailey 2009). Although the focus of this issue of Peer Review and the remainder of this article will be on adults beginning or continuing their enrollment as college students at a later-than-typical age, a 2002 NCES report has frequently been cited as noting that when the term "nontraditional student" is defined more broadly to include seven characteristics not typically associated with participation in college, a full 73 percent of students may be viewed as nontraditional (Choy 2002, 1). These characteristics include

- entry to college delayed by at least one year following high school,
- having dependents,
- being a single parent,
- being employed full time,
- being financially independent,
- attending part time, and
- not having a high school diploma.

K. Patricia Cross referred to some of the same student groups using the term "non-traditional" some twenty years ago (Cross 1981). The social and economic forces that have led to adults' increased participation in higher education in the decades since Cross used this term are not likely to abate in the near future. These influences include an aging and increasingly diverse population, the rapid pace of technological change, and the constantly shifting demands of the workplace in this era of a global economy. Adult learners who experience academic success in higher education tend to gain economic and personal benefits, which most likely provide social, political, and economic benefits for the broader society (Ritt 2008).

MULTIPLE ROLES OF ADULT LEARNERS

A key characteristic distinguishing reentry adults from other college students is the high likelihood that they are juggling other life roles while attending school, including those of worker, spouse or partner, parent, caregiver, and community member. These roles may be assets, both through the social supports they provide and through the rich life experiences that may help adult learners make meaning of theoretical constructs that may be purely abstract to younger learners. Yet more often, these multiple roles present challenges in students' allocation of time for both academic study and participation in campus-based organizations and activities. A 2003 NCES report titled Work First, Study Second indicated that at least 56 percent of students over age twenty-four who were included in the 1999–2000 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study saw themselves as workers first and students second, while 26 percent identified themselves as students who work. Only 18 percent did not work while enrolled (Berker and Horn 2003, 5). This report also noted that those students who considered themselves employees first were also more likely to be married, leaving them with at least three life roles to manage while attending school; this
group was also less likely to complete a degree in six years.

**PROGRAMMATIC RESPONSES TO ADULT LEARNERS**

Reentry adults’ multiple roles and commitments increase the likelihood they will look for degree and certificate programs that provide them flexibility in time and locations for both course completion and for access to key student services. In recent decades, a number of institutions have been designed around the needs of adult students, such as Empire State University, Fielding Institute, Regis University, and, more recently, the University of Phoenix and many other institutions in the nonprofit sector. Within the last decade, institutions and programs geared toward serving adult students have been profiled in a number of sources, including *Lifelong Learning at Its Best: Innovative Practices in Adult Credit Programs* (Maehl 2000) and volumes of *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, including one on accelerated learning (Wlodkowski and Kasworm 2003) and another on adult degree programs (Papas and Jerman 2004). The innovative student support and learning strategies described in these sources are rarely found in traditional university programs, but could provide useful models for adaptation. One example of this type of program is Empire State’s faculty mentor model, which allows students to develop highly individualized programs of study. Other innovative adult learning practices—such as distance learning, accelerated course formats, and prior learning assessment—were previously uncommon in mainstream institutions or departments, but are increasingly commonplace today in traditional universities that range from small liberal arts institutions to large comprehensive and doctoral institutions.

**Distance Education**

NCES reported in 2008 that at least two-thirds of two-year and four-year Title IV degree-granting institutions offered online courses, blended/hybrid courses, or courses offered in other distance education formats for college-level credit (Parsad and Lewis 2008). The report, titled *Distance Education at Degree-Granting Postsecondary Institutions: 2006-2007*, indicates that online courses were offered by 61 percent of institutions, blended/hybrid courses at 35 percent of institutions and other forms of distance education were offered at 26 percent of institutions. Thirty-two percent of all two-year and four-year institutions reported offering college-level degree or certificate programs delivered totally through distance education. The factor most commonly cited as affecting the decision to offer distance education courses or programs was meeting student demand for flexible schedules, as reported by 68 percent of responding institutions. Nearly two-thirds of institutions reported an interest in providing access to college for students who do not otherwise have access; only 45 percent of institutions reported an interest in increasing student enrollment as a key factor (Parsad and Lewis 2008).

**Prior Learning Assessment**

A 2006 study by the Council on Adult Experiential Learning (CAEL) on the use of assessment of prior college-level learning as a means of acquiring college credit found that 87 percent of responding institutions accepted College-Level Examination Program (CLEP) exams, 84 percent accepted Advanced Placement credits, 70 percent accepted credit for corporate or military training (evaluated by the American Council on Education), and 66 percent made provisions for faculty evaluation of student portfolios demonstrating prior college level learning (Klein-Collins and Hein 2009, 187). While portfolio evaluation was not the most common form of prior learning assessment (PLA), an increase in acceptance of this method can be seen when compared to previous studies conducted by CAEL in 1996 (when 55 percent of institutions reported use of portfolios) and in 1991 (when 50 percent of institutions reported use) (Klein-Collins and Hein 2009, 188).

A more recent CAEL report, *Fueling the Race to Postsecondary Success: A 48-Institution Study of Prior Learning Assessment and Adult Student Outcomes* (Klein-Collins 2010), addresses faculty concerns about adult students getting “credit for life experience” by focusing on a study conducted by CAEL on student outcomes. Based on over 62,000 academic records of adult students from a geographically diverse institutional sample from forty-six percent public institutions, the study showed that 50 percent private of nonprofit institutions and 4 percent of for-profit institutions describe several positive outcomes for students who earned credit through prior learning assessment, when compared with students who did not make use of PLA (6–7, 12). Adult students who earned credit for prior learning were more likely to earn a bachelor’s degree within seven years—43 percent—in comparison to 15 percent of non-PLA students (7). Focusing only on the approximately 50 percent of students who matriculated in pursuit of a bachelor’s degree, the study found that 58 percent of PLA students were successful in achieving that goal, compared to only 27 percent of non-PLA students (35).

Differences in degree completion between PLA and non-PLA students were also found when controlling for GPA—66 percent of PLA students with GPAs of 3.0 or above completed degrees, compared to 35 percent of non-PLA students with similar GPAs (37). Furthermore, dramatic differences in graduation rates were reported between PLA and non-PLA students for both Hispanic and black students, with 40 percent of black PLA students completing bachelor’s degrees compared to 17 percent...
of black non-PLA students, and 47 percent of Hispanic PLA students completing bachelor’s degrees compared to 6 percent of Hispanic non-PLA students (50). These CAEL report findings suggest that providing opportunities for prior learning assessment may have a substantial effect on adult student persistence.

**Accelerated Course Formats**
Courses, certificates, and degrees designed to be completed in a shorter time frame and in which either course duration or contact hours may be modified are learning formats that tend to be more responsive to adult learners’ lives (Wlodkowski 2003). Although these intensive learning experiences are sometimes criticized as formats that prioritize convenience over rigor and sacrifice breadth and depth, a number of studies indicate that adult learning in accelerated courses is comparable to or better than that of younger students enrolled in conventional courses. For instance, Wlodkowski reports a qualitative study indicating that intensive courses “became rewarding and powerful learning experiences when certain attributes were present … These attributes included instructor enthusiasm and expertise (usually gained through experience), active learning, classroom interaction, good course organization, student input, a collegial classroom atmosphere, and a relaxed environment” (9) When adult students in accelerated courses are compared with younger students in conventional versions of the same types of courses, both groups of students generally have shown positive and similar attitudes toward their courses. Finally, when attitudes of alumni toward accelerated courses in management, human resource management, and corporate finance were assessed, their perceptions were nearly as positive as current students who responded to the same survey (10).

**THEORIES OF ADULT LEARNING**
While much of what is written about adapting to adult learners within higher education focuses on ways in which institutions and programs can modify student services and course delivery formats and systems to accommodate the needs of reentry students, adult education research also provides insight into understanding the characteristics of these learners within the classroom or distance education environment (Ross-Gordon 2003).

**Frameworks for Understanding Adult Learning**
In recent decades, several theoretical approaches to adult learning have served as useful lenses for research on adult learners; these frameworks help researchers think about practices across various contexts of adult learning, including the college classroom. Andragogy is arguably the best-known of these theoretical approaches. Malcolm Knowles is credited with bringing this framework to attention in North America, although he acknowledged its previous European origins (Knowles 1980). According to this framework, adults are assumed to

- prefer self-direction in learning,
- bring a vast reservoir of experience that should be considered in planning learning experience,
- exhibit a readiness to learn that is based on a need to know something or do something,
- exhibit an orientation to learning that is task- or problem-centered rather than subject-centered, and
- exhibit a relatively high degree of internal motivation.

While andragogy has been widely debated by scholars, who note the situational variables that influence the degree to which adults exhibit these characteristics, this framework is one of the most enduring and widely cited theories of adult learning (Merriam 2001).

Other adult learning theories center on self-directed learning (SDL), a key assumption of andragogy and itself the focus of numerous professional conferences and papers. One SDL theory posited that educational goals within formal education could be supported by using teaching methods and assignments designed to increase learner control of the learning process relative to that of instructors (Candy 1991). Other theories suggest that self-directed learning can be situational and may be exhibited at different levels among college students of various ages as they encounter different learning environments (Grow 1991).

In the past twenty years, transformative learning (TL) has become one of the most prominent and debated theories in adult learning research, with the version of TL proposed by Jack Mezirow (2000) receiving perhaps the greatest attention. Mezirow and others view transformational learning as involving fundamental transformation of the adults’ core frames of reference, often in response to disorienting dilemmas—situations that challenge adults’ previous ways of thinking about the world and prompt them to reflect critically on previously held assumptions. While much of the research on transformational learned has focused on TL that occurs both in higher education and naturally as an outgrowth of adult life situations, some have also proposed that educators can help stimulate transformative learning by using teaching methods that foster critical reflection (Cranton 1994).

**RESEARCH ON ADULT LEARNERS IN COLLEGE CLASSROOMS**
A number of studies have explored the characteristics of adult learners in the college classroom, providing substantial but not unqualified support for the assumptions linked to the theoretical frameworks of adult learning and development described above. My own chapter in a
modes of distance learning, prior learning assessment, and intensive courses, some of which are profiled in other articles within this issue. Faculty can play an important role as change agents in creating supportive learning environments for adult learners both by incorporating theory and research on adult learners into their own classrooms and by advocating for adult-oriented programs and services on their campuses (Blair 2010). The design and delivery of these programs are key to successful undergraduate experiences for reentry adult students.

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Highlights from AAC&U Work on Community College Students and Liberal Education Outcomes

THE AAC&U ROADMAP PROJECT
Nearly half of the students who attend community colleges are adult learners. Therefore, it is essential to facilitate the role of these institutions as critical access points for nontraditional and underserved students to receive a quality liberal education. Developing a Community College Student Roadmap: From Entrance to Engagement in Educational Achievement and Success, known as the Roadmap Project, is a project under AAC&U’s Liberal Education and America’s Promise (LEAP) initiative designed to aid in the creation of robust and proactive programs of academic support at community colleges. The project is supported by a grant from MetLife Foundation.

Participating colleges work to integrate student support efforts, such as advising, developmental education, and experiential learning, with liberal education learning outcomes, thus engaging students at entrance and teaching them to be active partners in their own quest for educational success. With the LEAP essential learning outcomes as a guide, Roadmap leadership institutions align student success efforts into integrated roadmaps, providing students with the kind of learning opportunities that prepare them for work, life, and citizenship in our complex and volatile world.

The Roadmap Project’s theory of action (see diagram) focuses on four primary elements related to the achievement of essential learning outcomes for all students: cross-divisional collaboration between academic and student affairs professionals, program integration for a clear and comprehensive pathway for student success, enhanced assessment strategies that measure quality of learning and outcomes, and the use of high-impact practices for engaged student learning. Participating campuses will develop transferable models grounded in authentic evidence of “what works.”

In its initial phase, the Roadmap Project is working intensively with a dozen community colleges that are poised to become national models in supporting community college student success. Participating colleges include Hostos Community College (NY); Gainesville State College (GA); Georgia Perimeter College (GA); Lane Community College (OR); Miami Dade College (FL); Middlesex Community College (MA); Mt. San Antonio College (CA); Northern Virginia Community College (VA); Prince George’s Community College (MD); Queensborough Community College (NY); Salt Lake Community College (UT); and Tidewater Community College (VA).

Community Colleges by the Numbers
- More than 7.4 million people attend community college as credit-earning students
- Forty-five percent of community college students are between the ages of twenty-two and thirty-nine
- Forty-two percent of the community college population composed of first-generation students
- Between fall 2008 and fall 2010, the estimated total increase in community college enrollment was 15 percent
- Sixty percent of community college students attend classes part time

For the last forty-five years—since before Education and Identity, with its seven vectors of student development, hit the streets in 1969—I have been banging my head and heart against a common mindset in higher education: the total focus on knowing and doing to the neglect of being. Back in the 1960s, the dominant purpose of college was “cultivating the intellect.” AAC&U’s LEAP initiative and its focus on a broad set of essential learning outcomes (ELOs) indicate how far we have come since then. There have been similarly strong strides in our teaching practices, with the inclusion of service learning, internships, and collaborative and problem-based learning. With all this good progress, the “affective domain” (as we used to call it), remains conspicuous by its absence.

For today’s students, dealing with questions of purpose and meaning has become more daunting than it was fifty years ago. Today’s young adults run into a range of lifestyle, belief, and value-system choices far greater than the male-dominated, Christian, and community-based norms that defined our culture in the ’50 and ’60s. No other social institution is as well positioned to help address these issues as our colleges and universities. We, and our students, will only be able to apply AAC&U’s ELOs with the time, energy, and emotion they deserve if these affective challenges are also addressed.

I use “we” and “our students” for two reasons. First, Astin, Astin, and Lindholm’s Cultivating the Spirit documents the high proportion of faculty members still finding themselves addressing questions of purpose and meaning, still pursuing their spiritual quests. So, as educator Parker Palmer writes so eloquently, we all strive for ways to let our lives speak.

Second, these questions remain—usually in the background but sometimes in the foreground—in our adult learners as well as ourselves. This insight struck me powerfully in the 1970s, when I worked with Empire State College students on their individualized degree programs as the institution’s founding academic vice president. As you would expect, their initial responses to “Why are you coming here?” were “I want to get a better job” and “I need a degree to get a promotion or a raise.”

But when we put those immediate concerns in a larger context—“What kind of life do you want to be leading five or ten years from now?”—all those issues of purpose, meaning, identity, integrity, autonomy, and relationships came bubbling up. By assessing their prior learning from work and life experiences—not only managing family affairs, but through complex volunteer activities—these students realized how much they knew and could do. By pursuing purposes they articulated for themselves, they came out prepared to create their own lives.

Of course, I should not have been surprised that these issues concerning purpose and meaning, identity and integrity, interdependence, and interpersonal relationships were as important for our adults as they were for the typical college-age students I had studied. I was experiencing them powerfully myself, as I struggled with the challenges of academic leadership and a six-year weekend marriage, away from my kids. And in different ways, those issues are still here at age 85.

So I continue to urge all my colleagues against neglecting the “affective domain,” even as they focus on prioritizing other essential learning outcomes for the diverse population pursuing higher education for a better life.

REFERENCE

Finding Purpose and Meaning in and out of the Classroom

Art Chickering, special assistant to the president, Goddard College
AC&U is the leading national association concerned with the quality, vitality, and public standing of undergraduate liberal education. Its members are committed to extending the advantages of a liberal education to all students, regardless of academic specialization or intended career. Founded in 1915, AAC&U now comprises more than 1,200 member institutions—including accredited public and private colleges and universities of every type and size.

AAC&U functions as a catalyst and facilitator, forging links among presidents, administrators, and faculty members who are engaged in institutional and curricular planning. Its mission is to reinforce the collective commitment to liberal education at both the national and local levels and to help individual institutions keep the quality of student learning at the core of their Information about AAC&U membership, programs, and publications can be found at www.aacu.org.

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