Chapter 18
Asynchronicity, Access, and Attainment: Best Practices of an Adult Degree Completion Program

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the authors share specific ways in which the Organizational Leadership and Learning Program provides excellence in access, cost effectiveness, learning effectiveness, and faculty and student satisfaction. The program is designed to meet the needs of adult learners with some college but no degree and incorporates the use of asynchronous content delivery and faculty-student interaction. The exposure to course content via an online platform, interaction with students and faculty online, and the development of a learning community at a distance equips students not only with content knowledge, but also with technical prowess that is necessary in a technology-based workplace. Despite the relative ease of access and clear benefits of higher education, challenges still exist with educating an adult population. Therefore, it is essential that more adult friendly practices become integrated into the fabric of traditional four-year colleges and universities.

INTRODUCTION

The Bachelor of Science in Organizational Leadership and Learning (OLL) was identified as a model program for degree completion initiatives by the University of Louisville in 2007. The major previously titled Workforce Leadership and Occupational Training and Development was adapted and refined to address the Council on Postsecondary Education’s Double the Numbers goal by the
year 2020. The online program curriculum was redesigned and implemented in coordination with the state and local graduation initiatives in order to address needs of the underserved population of adult students. This fully online degree program is designed for working professionals with previous college credit and five or more years of work experience in various career fields related to leadership, organizational development, training and development, human resources, and workforce development. Recently, the OLL program was awarded the Innovation in Educational Attainment Prize from the Gheen’s Foundation and 55,000 Degrees for the advancement of national adult degree attainment. The program was also the recipient of the 2013 AAACE Malcolm Knowles Award for Adult Education Program of the Year and was acknowledged as a 2013 National Program of Distinction in the American Public and Land Grant Universities’ MVP Awards for Campus Based Strategies for Student Success.

Another distinctive feature of the program offers adult learners the ability to earn up to 48 college credits for military training, workplace experiential learning, certifications, licenses, and other experiential learning through a Prior Learning Assessment portfolio. These portfolio-based credits have been empirically shown to accelerate pace to degree and improve percentage of graduation of those adult learners that engage in and receive credits for prior learning (CAEL, 2011). The curriculum for the B.S. in Organizational Leadership and Learning, which is offered fully online, focuses on content areas such as leadership, human resources, needs assessment, workplace diversity, and design and delivery of educational or training curriculum and strives to develop intrapersonal (self-concept) and interpersonal (relationship) dimensions of a student. The introduction of this innovative program resulted in a surge of enrollment, tripling the number of adult learners enrolled from approximately 170 in fall 2007 to its current enrollment of over 500 students in Spring 2014 and has resulted in significant growth in retention and graduation rates. In this chapter, we share the specific ways in which the OLL Program provides excellence in access, cost effectiveness, learning effectiveness, and faculty and student satisfaction.

ACCESS

For more than 100 years, almost 50% of college students have failed to persist to graduation (ACT, 2010; Tinto, 1993; U.S. Department of Education, 2008). To make matters worse, adult students persist at lower rates than their traditional counterparts. Nationally, the number of traditional age students coming from high school to college is declining. In the state of Kentucky, the number of young people coming out of high school and headed to college remains flat (Kentucky Council, 2010). The University of Louisville initiated a degree completion program to change the community’s education trajectory toward a more advanced workforce with top quality knowledge, skills, and abilities to address the global problems of the future.

National Agenda

While adult learners occupy a growing percentage of total enrollments at U.S. colleges and universities, they continue to represent a much smaller segment of the published literature (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). Despite this, the relevance of adult learners to the viability of many institutions of higher learning is becoming increasingly evident. New degree programs and institutions that offer convenient and flexible degree programs have been established to serve the influx of this often neglected subpopulation of students. The response, however, has not been sufficient. The gap in literature suggests that academics, practitioners, and policy-makers must examine how the academy attracts and retains adult learners. Institutions that develop meaningful professional
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