From Stopout to Scholar: 
Pathways to Graduation through Adult Degree Completion Programs

Matt Bergman, College of Education & Human Development, University of Louisville, Louisville, KY, USA

ABSTRACT

Although colleges and universities are facing increased scrutiny to demonstrate a return on investment for their students, the demand for college-educated workers continues to grow. As of 2010, the U.S. Census Bureau estimated that more than one-fifth of Americans age 25 and older—around 43.5 million people—have some postsecondary education but no degree (Lumina, 2012). This article presents an integrative review of relevant, rigorous, and research based programs that create a fast path to degree completion for working adults. While national data still shows that postsecondary credentials remain a good investment for individuals and the overall economy (Carnavale & Rose, 2015), the public is asserting a greater demand for accountability as tuition continues to escalate well beyond the rate of inflation. This article provides a review and conceptual links to educational pathways for the large group of adult learners with some college and no degree.

KEYWORDS

Adult Degree Completion Programs, Adult Learners, Asynchronous, Online Learning, Persistence

INTRODUCTION

Consider that there are more than 162.3 million people in the United States workforce (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012). More than 43 million of those people are adult working age individuals (ages 25 and older) that have some college but no degree (Lumina, 2012). Yet, the U.S. labor market now requires postsecondary education for most entry-level positions and mid-level occupations and by 2018, 63% of jobs will need some form of postsecondary training (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2010). The U.S. economy will have jobs for 22 million workers with college degrees, but a shortage of about 3 million college graduates (Carnevale et al., 2010). These statistics show the growing need for more of the nation’s workforce to earn postsecondary credentials. To that end, reputable institutions of higher learning must address the needs of working adults with relevant, rigorous, and research based programs that align with the workforce needs of each region throughout the United States.

While there is evidence of expanded adult focused offerings in traditional non-profit higher education, many for-profit institutions were the early adopters of adult friendly practices. Sadly, some of the less upstanding institutions in the for-profit market had engaged in unfair and predatory recruiting practices, poor quality degrees with few job prospects, and insurmountable debt for some students. Thankfully, the increased scrutiny and call for accountability in higher education is having positive results on both for-profit and non-profit institutions. In fall 2015, overall enrollment in U.S. colleges and universities decreased 1.7 percent from the previous fall 2014 (National Student Clearinghouse, 2015). The vast majority of this decline occurred in the for-profit sector with a 13.7 percent reduction in overall enrollment. Conversely, the four-year public enrollment remained flat at just over 8 million students (0.4% growth from prior year).
The complexity of the challenges facing higher education has never been greater. The need for a systematic approach that focuses on the entire college completion population is clearly evident. Therefore, institutions of all type must enhance policies and practices that remove barriers for the 43 million Americans with some college and no degree so at least a portion of these working adults may enhance their educational attainment in a streamline and efficient manner. This effort would address this subset of the overall student body in American colleges and universities.

Whether one pursues a postsecondary certificate, associate’s, or a bachelor’s, there are increasing options that provide convenient and flexible pathways to achieving the long held goal of receiving a degree. Beyond economic concerns, there are important social and psychological reasons to improve the educational attainment of adults. For example, adults who attained a college degree not only make, on average, a million dollars more over their careers, but also reported healthier lifestyles and increased levels of civic engagement (Baum & Ma, 2007; Perna, 2005). Research shows that attainment of the degree can have wide implications for an adult students’ social and psychological development. Their unemployment rates are also 30% lower than that of high school graduates with an unemployment rate of 2.5%, compared with all other persons at 8.3% (Turner & Krumenauer, 2010). College graduates also provide at least $300,000 more over a lifetime in federal taxes (Adult Learning in Focus CAEL, 2008).

**ADULT DEGREE COMPLETION PROGRAMS**

Adult Degree Completion Programs (ADCPs) are becoming increasingly relevant within the higher education community and are growing at a rapid pace across the nation (Taylor, 2000). According to the North Central Association’s Higher Learning Commission Task Force on Adult Degree-Completion Programs (2000), an adult-degree completion program is one designed especially to meet the needs of the working adult who, having acquired sixty or more college credit hours during previous enrollments, is returning to school after an extended period of absence to obtain a baccalaureate degree. The institution’s promise that the student will be able to complete the program in fewer than two years of continuous study is realized through provisions such as establishing alternative class schedules, truncating the traditional semester/quarter time frame, organizing student cohorts, and awarding credit for prior learning experiences equivalent to approximately 25% of the bachelor’s degree credit total (Task Force, 2000). Adult degree programs share common characteristics including but not limited to: distance (online) options, evening course options, weekend course options, test-out (CLEP and DSST) options, and college credit for prior learning in the workplace.

Educational programs for adults are conducted for five primary purposes: to encourage continuous growth and development of individuals, to assist people in responding to practical problems and issues of adult life, to prepare people for current and future work opportunities, to assist organizations in achieving desired results and adapting to change, and to provide opportunities to examine community and societal issues (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). Closing the gap between theory and practice in undergraduate education is essential to ensuring the well being of individuals and the future of our society (Kuh, 2008). Among the best practices for both traditional and adult learners include outreach, financing, life and career planning, assessment of learning outcomes, teaching-learning process, student support systems, technology, and strategic partnership.

Changes in demographics are forcing colleges and universities to consider more adult-friendly practices in order to keep their doors open. Between 1970 and 1991, adult participation in higher education rose at a rate of 171.4%. Adult learners have steadily increased over the past three decades, to more than 45% of the total student population (Choy, 2002; Kasworm, 2003a). The U.S. Census Bureau (2008) reported that 53.8% of men and 61.1% of women between 25 and 29 years old have some college but no degree.

This significant number of adults with some college and no degree has created an adult degree completion program phenomenon and it is impacting thousands of institutions. Within the next twenty
Related Content

Towards Proxemic Mobile Collocated Interactions
www.igi-global.com/article/towards-proxemic-mobile-collocated-interactions/187189?camid=4v1a

Practical Experimentation with Human Implants
www.igi-global.com/chapter/practical-experimentation-with-human-implants/95988?camid=4v1a

Interactive Design of 3D Dynamic Gesture Based on SVM-LSTM Model
www.igi-global.com/article/interactive-design-of-3d-dynamic-gesture-based-on-svm-lstm-model/207702?camid=4v1a
3D Virtual Worlds: Assessing the Experience and Informing Design
Sean Goggins, Matthew Schmidt, Jesus Guajardo and Joi L. Moore (2013).
*Integrations of Technology Utilization and Social Dynamics in Organizations* (pp. 194-213).
www.igi-global.com/chapter/virtual-worlds-assessing-experience-informing/68143?camid=4v1a