Beacon of Hope: Award-Winning Program Redesign for Post-Traditional Students

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ABSTRACT

Many Americans dream of completing a college degree, positively influencing wages and economic mobility. The number of students entering college or returning to college later in life is growing. Up to 75% of university enrollments are comprised of students in one or more of the following circumstances: 25 years old or older, attend school part-time, work full-time, parents. These students, described in the literature as non-traditional or post-traditional students, have different needs from traditionally-aged students. The award-winning Bachelor of Applied Arts and Sciences (BAAS) program, in Texas State University’s Department of Occupational, Workforce, and Leadership Studies (OWLS), provides a pathway for post-traditional students to earn a college degree. This article features the voices of post-traditional students and discusses background information as context. The work of Malcolm Knowles and his ideas about andragogy serve as a framework for analyzing the BAAS program as well as implications and future.

KEYWORDS

Accelerated Learning, Adult Degree Programs, Andragogy, Degree Completion, Post-Traditional Students, Prior Learning Assessment (PLA), Program Delivery, Program Redesign

INTRODUCTION

Many Americans dream of completing a college degree, positively influencing wages and economic mobility. Those with a high school diploma earn an average $27,915 per year, while those with a bachelor’s degree earn 83.4% more, an average $51,206 per year (Longley, 2016). Over a lifespan, college graduates earn $570,000 more than high school graduates (Greenstone & Looney, 2011). In addition, wages for college graduates are increasing at a much faster rate compared to wages for those with only a high school diploma (Currier, 2015). Yet, 86.7% of adults age 25 or over have high school degrees, but only 29.8% have college degrees (United States Census Bureau, 2015). A variety of reasons drive the return of non-traditional students to college including life transitions, lay-offs, career changes, and second chances to further education (Chen, 2015).

The number of non-traditional students pursuing a college degree continues to increase, and non-traditional students have different needs than traditional students. The literature offers several
definitions of non-traditional students, which most often include age and part-time student status (Langrehr, Phillips, Melville, & Eum, 2015). For fall 2015, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES; 2016) reported 41% (8.1 million) of undergraduate students were 25 years or older, and another 34% (2.6 million) were part-time students under 25 years old. Therefore, 75% of U.S. undergraduates were non-traditional students, who differ and have distinct needs from traditional students. Now the majority, the term post-traditional student more aptly describes this group, who juggle multiple roles and responsibilities in the family, workplace, and community (Panacci, 2015; Poulson, 1993; Ross-Gordon, 2011). As a result, they seek flexible programs including online education, prior learning assessment (PLA), and accelerated course formats (Ross-Gordon, 2011). In addition, post-traditional students bring work and life experiences to the classroom, often experience personal and/or professional transition while pursuing their college degree, have little or no recent higher education experience, have clear career goals, and likely pay for their own education (Poulson, 1993). Thus, post-traditional students want active, collaborative, and interactive learning relevant to career and other roles and goals (Panacci, 2015; Poulson, 1993).

The Bachelor of Applied Arts and Sciences (BAAS) program, in Texas State University’s Department of Occupational, Workforce, and Leadership Studies (OWLS), provides a pathway for post-traditional students to earn a college degree. The program is one of approximately 50 applied baccalaureate degree programs in the United States (Bragg & Ruud, 2011). Applied baccalaureate degrees incorporate higher-order thinking skills and advanced technical knowledge and skills with applied coursework (Townsend, Bragg, & Ruud, 2008). As one program feature, students can earn credits through PLA, evaluating and credentialing knowledge and skills gained outside the classroom into college-level academic credit (Klein-Collins, 2010). In the United States, PLA students have higher rates of degree completion than non-PLA students (Klein-Collins, 2010), accelerating access to increased career and life success (Bamford-Rees, Doyle, Klein-Collins, Wertheim, & CAEL, 2014).

The purpose of this article is to examine the BAAS program which recently won the American Association for Adult and Continuing Education’s (AAACE) Malcolm Knowles Award for outstanding adult education program leadership. This article features the voices of post-traditional students and discusses background information as context. The work of Malcolm Knowles and his ideas about andragogy serve as a framework for analyzing the BAAS program as well as implications and future.

BACKGROUND OF A WELL-LOVED BUT OUTDATED “HOUSE”

The Bachelor of Applied Arts and Sciences (BAAS) program at Texas State University was designed in 1973 to serve adult learners, particularly those returning from military service. Since inception, this unique interdisciplinary program has served thousands of post-traditional students along the Interstate Highway-35 corridor and beyond through evening courses, correspondence-style delivery methods, remote offerings, and hybrid instruction. According to alumni feedback and testimonials, the BAAS program has transformed the lives of post-traditional students, particularly giving them an academic “home.” According to conceptual metaphor theory (CMT), metaphor is a linguistic and literary device central to human thought and encompasses several conceptual domains (Gibbs, 2008, 2011). To discuss this home for post-traditional learners, this examination uses a house as metaphor to describe the program and subsequent remodeling and updating to meet the needs of 21st century inhabitants, including increased hybrid and new online offerings (see Figure 1).

Although active for over 40 years, until recently, the major BAAS program components remained largely untouched. Like a house of the same era with only routine maintenance over the years, the program needed attention to strengthen its foundation, inner-workings, and cosmetic appeal. The faculty of the BAAS program faculty and staff took on the work of strategic planning and program redesign through a multi-year process. This cumbersome work, like remodeling an older house, was a labor of love requiring a sequential process. The first step comprised checking the program’s foundation. Like a 1970’s house with “stair step” cracks, the program’s foundation showed erosion
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