

# CONNECTING TO THE PART-TIME ADULT STUDENT<sup>1, 2</sup> (LA RELACIÓN CON EL ESTUDIANTE ADULTO DE TIEMPO PARCIAL)

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## RESUMEN

La educación universitaria es cada vez más necesaria como medio para conseguir empleo. Por ello es importante que las universidades modernas incluyan programas disponibles que permitan acceso a la educación universitaria a aquellos adultos que ya son parte de la población laboral activa. Ellos seguramente deberán seguir trabajando y, a la vez, ir

<sup>1</sup> US Department of Education, Annual Report, 2004.

<sup>2</sup> Summary report 2005, State of Oregon cost analysis of community college vs. university education, Salem.

a la universidad. Este escrito aboga por la necesidad de un compromiso institucional que satisfaga las necesidades de ese tipo de estudiantes, y propone varias formas en las que puede manejarse dicho programa sin perder la calidad académica.

*Palabras clave:* educación para adultos; programas universitarios para adultos que trabajan.

## ABSTRACT

As university level education becomes increasingly necessary to obtain employment, it is important for modern universities to have programs available which allow adults who are already in the work force to get a college-level education. Working adults most likely will need to continue to work and attend college at the same time. This article argues for the need to have an institutional commitment to meet the needs of those types of students and suggests several ways that such a program can be managed while maintaining quality scholarship.

*Key words:* adult education; college programs for working adults.

## INTRODUCTION

University level education is becoming more and more necessary for many positions and jobs. To compete in a global economy, one which is often driven by ever-increasing technological changes, a person must have an advanced education that will offer skills that employers seek in their employees. In the United States, the US Department of Commerce reported that 89 percent of all *new* jobs created between 1990 and 2000 required at least a four-year degree. At the same time, only about 35 percent of persons entering the job market for the first time held these degrees.

Since many people have entered the job market without a college or university education they now find that they must begin, or return to college for a degree if they wish to advance. Often for these adults, going to college on a full-time basis just isn't possible. Most adults have employment,

families or other obligations that simply do not allow the time to attend classes held at traditional times. And, most often an adult student cannot afford to pay for college on a full-time basis. The result is that many adults simply do not try to attend or attend on a part-time basis.

So how can colleges and universities accommodate the part-time adult student, and for that matter why should colleges and universities even try, after all aren't there enough «traditional» age students who are able to attend school full time? Actually, in the United States, of the 16 million persons seeking a bachelor's degree, only one in four is *under* 22 years of age (1).

Portland State University offers a good example of this phenomenon. The average age of an undergraduate is 26, while the average age of all students is 28. Of the total university population of 24,000, thirty-percent attend on a part-time basis, so a majority of students exceed the «traditional» age, and significant number are attending on a part-time basis.

Community Colleges play a significant role in efforts to increase the numbers of person attempting to seek and complete a four year degree. In the US, most students who enter a community college do not do so with the intent of completing an associate degree; that is 90 credits towards a 180 credit quarter based system bachelor's degree. In fact, less than 10 percent of community college students actually complete an associate degree. Trends show that students attending the community colleges usually obtain a technical certification (usually 45 credits) and immediately enter the work force. However, after several years in the jobs that the technical jobs, many students seek to advance their positions and realize that they will need to complete at least a bachelor's degree and to do so must reenter the education system in some manner.

The «reentry» student will have to consider several factors to further his/her education: 1. Transferability of credits obtained at the community college or technical school; 2. cost; 3. accessibility; that is, whether the student can find a time to attend and still accommodate a job, family and other commitments.

I would argue that indeed, it is in the best interests of colleges and universities to find ways to deliver education to adults who are able to attend only on a part time basis. As I have pointed out, at Portland State University, we have a significant number of part-time older adult students and catering to that population has increased our total student enrollments. Certainly a well educated population that can compete in the world economy, is in the best interests of any nation, and the universities should further that opportunity for its citizens in any way they can. Also, expanding the part time student population base, offers the universities and colleges additional revenues as these adult oriented programs often have high enrollments and can be less expensive to deliver.

## **INSTITUTIONAL COMMITMENT**

Making the connection to the adult learner and retaining the student through to degree completion requires some fundamental policies that an institution must adopt if its program is to be successful. The first and most significant is to adopt a policy which commits the institution to serve the adult student with the recognition that the majority of the adults will be part-time.

While this may seem simple, in fact the implications of such a policy can have a significant impact on all aspects of the university or college. Traditional institutions are often not geared to serve the part time student. Many, if not most, adult students will have jobs and cannot go to a campus during regular hours. Universities who wish to accommodate these students must make the advising, registration, and counseling services available at times to meet the adult student needs. Using on line registration and even advising services is one way to deal with this, but many adult students will feel more comfortable if they can meet an advisor face-to-face and walk away with a plan of action for their education that they participated in designing. That means the offices must remain open after regular hours and on weekends. At Portland State University we have established offices at each of the community college offices in the region. These offices provide initial admissions and advising function and link the potential student to a departmental advisor. Portland State University also allows students to co-admit to the University and the community college at the same time. By allowing the student to co-admit, a student's

academic program can be coordinated to insure all necessary courses are completed. The student benefits because classes at the community colleges cost less and the more applicable classes taken there reduces the overall cost his/her education (2).

For most people, regardless of age, the university or college can be an intimidating place. Trying to navigate through the admission process is often difficult, while trying to navigate through the course and program degree requirements is often in a language only intelligible to professional academicians and administrators. On top of this, the adult student because they work or have family obligations often does not have the time to weave their way through the maze, cannot stand in line to register or apply for financial aid or a host of other things that the traditional student views as a rite of passage.

## **REMOVING BARRIERS, RETAINING STUDENTS**

To overcome this barrier for adults, the admissions process should be thought of in terms of a marketing program, and indeed, recruiting students for admission is a marketing function. An adult will want to see a complete outline of requirements for degree completion that is understandable, and which has a definitive time-line for completion. In surveys done by my office, convenience and clarity were the two things cited as most significant in a potential student's selection of a school to attend. By clarity they were looking for a clear path of navigation; which classes, what sequencing and where and at what times were the classes available.

At Portland State University we have established an Office of Adult Student Education Services (OASES) to directly serve the adult part-time student and coordinate the activities of our offices on the community college campuses. These offices are open after hours and on weekends. OASES has the capacity to register students, provide advising on programs and generally assist these students with any problems they have in accessing the educational <sup>3</sup> programs at the university. The office serves

<sup>3</sup> Earn College Credit for What You Know.

as a haven for the adult who is trying to work, raise children, and has other conflicts that make going to college difficult. OASES is responsible for scheduling classes on evening and weekends, finding instructors who will teach the classes and if the class is offered off campus, finding suitable rooms for the classes.

Retaining the adult student in a program is often more daunting than getting them into a program in the first place. Part time students not only need flexible scheduling, they may need to leave programs and reenter at a later date. Establishing policies that allow students to «drop out and in» may be difficult on the administration, but it will go a long way in retaining students in the long run.

## RECOGNIZING EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

Many adults have learned skill through their work experience. They may have learned these skills by on the job training or through participation in workshops provided by employers. Some or part of this type of experiential learning may be applicable or substitute for course required in a degree program. To determine the application of experiential learning to a degree program is not a simple matter of looking at a person's resume and then recording credits on a transcript. The actual learning *value* of the experience must be demonstrated. Students interested in earning such credits are normally shown how to chronicle their learning and must match that experience to the learning outcomes on the syllabus of a particular class.

It has been said that using the experiential learning process is more arduous than taking a class. But offering this type of credit option to an adult recognizes that the life experience a person has had has educational value. Tough as it may be to earn credit through this process, it does offer the student an opportunity to get a head start on their degree. The institution must adopt policies and procedures to implement this option and can turn to the Council for Adult Experiential Education (CAEL) that offers workshops and guidance for such programs (3).

## QUALITY SHOULD NOT BE COMPROMISED

Adopting flexible scheduling and giving extra attention to the adult and part time student to their needs in no way implies that the quality of the classes or programs should be compromised. There are, unfortunately, any numbers of programs specifically targeted at adults, which make it «easy» for the prospective student to get access to a degree. While these programs do make it easy for students to enter easily and have a flexible course schedule, that is often done at the cost of quality of the education offered.

Flexibility is not a substitute for a good education. At the same time there is no reason that a class that is offered in a non-traditional format cannot offer quality education. At Portland State University we offer «hybrid» classes aimed at the adult part time student. They are called hybrid as they are offered partially on line and partially in class. For example, the term is ten weeks and student in a traditional class would meet for three hours each week, either once a week for three hours or three times a week for one hour at each session. However, a hybrid class allows the student to take the class partially on line but still attend class every other week. Students like this format because it allows them some degree of flexibility due to the on line portion and yet allows them face to face contact with their instructor. These hybrids have the added advantage to the university in maximum use of classroom space as other classes can be scheduled in the same classroom on the alternate weeks.

«Stacked classes» is another method that allows adults to attend classes for shorter time period. In this method, classes are offered on an intensified basis. Rather than a ten week term, in the stacked classes, the class meets for only five weeks, four nights a week. A student can then «stack on» another five week intensive class in the same ten week term. Often the part time student is unable to take more than one class a term, due to other obligations, stacking classes allows them to move toward degree completion more quickly. It should be noted that because of the intense nature of this type of teaching, it can be difficult to find instructors willing to teach this way and it is a good idea to offer incentives for those willing to do so.

## **PLAN FOR SERVICES, CONSIDER COSTS**

Operating a flexible, accessible program for the part time adult student does mean additional costs to the university. This can include staff dedicated to assisting the adult part time student to creating a 24 help desk in the case of on line classes. Once an institution has made a policy decision that it will serve the adult part time student, the institution should undertake a functional planning process as to how it will deliver these services and what the cost implications might be.

Once a pro forma has been done to determine the total costs (and it is suggested that this been done to look out three years), then the institution can establish fees adequate to cover the additional costs. In surveying the Portland State University students who take these classes, we found they do not mind paying the extra fee. Students stated that they felt the personalized service they received was worth the extra cost, and they saw great value in being able to take the flexible course schedules. Over all once Portland State University took steps to provide these services and classes, enrollments increased in spite of the additional costs.

## **TOTAL EFFORT**

More and more adults realize that for them to be competitive in today's global economy they must have a formal university degree. Many others may wish to switch careers and will also need a degree to attain their goals. Universities and colleges that offer those degrees should be prepared to deliver the education to this growing «non-traditional» population. To do that requires a total effort by the university or college.

The first step is to adopt a university policy that makes the commitment to serve the adult part time student. Secondly, the university must adapt its delivery system to fit the schedules most adults can make, be that evenings, weekends or on line. Third, the university must be prepared to commit the resources to make this type of program work, but should not back away from recovering the costs of doing so.



And, finally, a university should approach entering this arena with foresight and careful planning. Nothing can be more disastrous than leaping before looking and that certainly applies when considering making the connection to the adult part time learner.

(1) The School of Extended Studies at Portland State University is a member of the Eduventure Learning Collaborative. This organization provides marketing survey and analysis for its members on a fee basis. Much of the direction for our program emphasis for meeting adult part time student education needs come for the analysis performed by Eduventures. You may find out more by visiting their web site at: [[www.eduventures.com](http://www.eduventures.com)].

(2) Council for Adult Experiential Learning or CAEL is a national, non-profit organization whose mission is to expand learning opportunities for adults. Founded in 1974, under the auspices of the Educational Testing Service, CAEL works with colleges, universities and others to create practical, effective lifelong learning solutions. More information may be found on CAEL's web site at: [[www.cael.org](http://www.cael.org)].

## **SIDEBAR INFORMATION**

Portland State University is Oregon's largest university with an enrollment of over 24,000 students. Located in downtown Portland Oregon, Portland State serves an urban population as a full service university offering bachelors, masters and doctoral degrees. It's motto «Let Knowledge Serve the City» is exemplified by university's strong curricular commitment to the region. As an Urban Land Grant University, Portland State University offers programs through its colleges of Urban and Public Affairs, Business, Arts and Sciences, Performing Arts, Engineering and Computer Science and Graduate Schools in Education and Social Work. Portland State University has the largest enrollment of international students in the state and prides itself on its international initiatives and connections with colleges and universities throughout the world ■

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