

# Quality Endeavors

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## Best Practices for Attracting and Retaining Undergraduate Adult Learners

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*“Penn State’s adult learner population has been on a 10-year decline (a 24% decrease) at nearly every campus location, despite the fact that the number of adult learners is growing nationally.”* [Center for Adult Learner Services, “Fall Semester Comparisons of Adult learner Enrollments” (available at: <http://www.sa.psu.edu/cals/commission/>) and U.S. Department of Education data]

*In this newsletter, Debora Cheney, Chair, Commission for Adult Learners and Larry and Ellen Foster Communications Librarian and Head, The Social Sciences and News and Microforms Libraries, The University Libraries, addresses the issue of attracting and retaining adult learners.*

*Cheney describes the myths and the realities of Penn State’s adult learner population and looks at what other academic institutions are doing to meet the educational needs of this student population. She describes opportunities for improvement—what Penn State could do differently that would turn these numbers around and allow us to return more adult learners, as President Spanier says, “to all campus locations.”*

The Commission for Adult Learners has been involved with a number of data projects that have sought to identify who Penn State’s adult learners are; why they come to Penn State; why they don’t come to Penn State, and from this to better understand what the university must do not only to attract and retain adult learners, but also to make it possible for them to survive and thrive here.

These projects include a survey of Penn State adult applicants (with the Center for Adult Learner Services); a 1999 Pulse Survey of adult learners; a 2003 Pulse Survey of newly enrolled adult learners; and focus groups held at three campus college locations focusing on best practices. In addition, the Commission is a co-sponsor of the Adult Data Partnership (with the Center for Adult Learner Services; Craig Weidemann, Vice Provost for Outreach; and John Romano, Vice Provost for Enrollment Management).

One of the very first things we as a Penn State community must do is to better understand the myths and the realities of Penn State’s adult learner population. We must recognize who our own adult learners are, who they are not, and how they differ from national trends. Charlene Harrison and Dan Stoicescu, Center for Adult Learner Services, have worked with the Adult Data Partnership to understand Penn State’s enrollment management data from the Data Warehouse and have developed a series of myths and realities for Penn State’s adult learner population.

**Myth 1:** It is widely held that the typical undergraduate adult learner is a 38-year-old female. (Aslanian, *Adult Students Today*, 2001) The reality is: Penn State’s adult learners are younger than the national average. Forty-three percent are under 30 and there are slightly more female than males. What’s interesting here is that in fact, some of our traditional-age students at some campuses are actually more like adult learners—working part time and pursuing a college degree.

**Myth 2:** It is widely held that adult learners should and do prefer to begin their Penn State careers by entering through our Continuing Education or World Campus delivery arms. The reality is that for fall semesters 2000-2003, 14 percent of Penn State's adult learners took courses offered by Continuing Education; only 7 percent of Penn State adult students took courses offered by the World Campus.

**Myth 3:** It is widely held that many adult learners are entering the university either to develop or gain job skills (certificates and associate degrees, possibly) or are entering the university for the first time with few study skills. The reality is that Penn State's adult learners are more likely to be transfer students than first-time students. This means they are also not necessarily bound to location—although some campuses do differ in this regard.

**Myth 4:** It is widely held that adult learners like (and should) take a few non-degree courses before they move into degree status. The reality is, at Penn State transfer students are not selecting this route. Currently, Penn State's non-degree enrollments are falling dramatically. More non-degree adult learners take resident instruction courses than courses offered through Continuing Education.

### **So, the question is: Why should we care about the difference between the myths and the realities of Penn State's adult learners?**

First of all, in order to better attract and retain adult learners, we need to be aware of the different types of adult learners at Penn State, e.g., those entering the university for the first time and those entering as transfer students; those who begin as non-degree adults and those who are degree-seeking students. The latter have very specific goals and about 55 percent graduate in five to six years. [The Adult Data Partnership and the Data Warehouse]

We also need to understand how Continuing Education, World Campus, resident instruction, non-degree, degree-seeking and all our other statuses and entry points can be quilted together to make them work for our adult learner population, rather than assuming adult learners prefer any single delivery arm.

Benchmarking with other colleges and universities at a recent Council on Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) conference, it was clear: institutions such as Regis College in Weston, Massachusetts, which seeks to attract both traditional-age and adult learner students, have come to believe that the dividing line between these two student populations is no longer valid. Using CAEL's *Principles of Effectiveness for Serving Adult Learners in Higher Education* (available at: <http://www.cael.org/alfi/principle.html>), academic institutions are learning how to identify "what is important to their adult learners," and how to "pinpoint their own organization's strengths and weaknesses" for attracting and retaining adult learners. What many universities are learning is that those services and programs that can benefit one student population can also benefit the other; and, together, they benefit the university.

### **What has the Commission for Adult Learners learned about how best to attract Pennsylvania's adult learners?**

The following reveal opportunities for improving the application, admission and registration processes for Penn State's adult learners. These are based on the Adult Applicant Survey of Penn State students who applied, were offered admissions, but elected not to enroll at a Penn State campus, and the October 2003 Pulse Survey on newly enrolled adult learners:

- ▶ The Adult Applicant and the 2003 Pulse surveys show that many adult learners come to the University for information through a Web site, and that adult learners are more likely to come for a campus visit. The research also tells us that they are confused by the array of entry points into the University and the lack of a single place—either a Web page or an informational center, or both—that can answer all of their questions regarding locations, programs, course offerings, financial aid, registration and application procedures.
- ▶ Results from the Adult Applicant Survey indicate that adult learners want to maximize their communication with the University, and they want to do it efficiently. They want to understand us.
- ▶ Providing better information about curriculum and sequencing may help to retain more adult learners at the University. Too many comments on both surveys indicate adult learners feel they were not given complete information early on in the application and registration process. That leads to frustration later for those who stay and lower retention rates for those who attempt to stay.
- ▶ Another opportunity for improvement is to look for ways to transfer credits more efficiently and to provide credit, as appropriate, for experiential learning. When adult learners have to take a course they feel they already took at another university or have to take a basic skills course that represents what they do every day at work, it effectively increases the cost of their education and the time it takes for them to complete a degree. Both result in adult learners turning to other institutions to complete or begin their higher education.

- Finding opportunities for increasing financial aid for adult learners could attract and retain more of this population. We know from Penn State's admission data, for example, that adult learners seeking fall admission apply in greater numbers in the spring/summer; in general, they apply in greater numbers closer to the beginning of the semester they are seeking enrollment; and we know most adult learners are financing their own education. In most cases, nearly all sources of institutional financial aid are long gone before these late applying adults arrive. Should we position our advertisements so that adult students are encouraged to apply for financial aid before they actually apply for admission or register? Should we hold back some financial aid monies for this population? Should we develop Trustee Scholarships aimed specifically at adult learners? Should we seek, through our legislative affairs office, to influence state financial aid deadlines?

### What has the Commission for Adult Learners learned about how best to retain Pennsylvania's adult learners?

Following are best practices and other opportunities for improving our ability to retain adult learners at Penn State:

- According to adult learner responses to the Student Satisfaction Surveys, adult learners are less likely than traditional-age students to use health services, student clubs and organizations; very few live in dorms or eat in dining halls; few attend sports events or use recreation facilities. However, they are more likely to use libraries, advising services, and to seek out their faculty. The reality is that for adult learners we must think of "front loading" the services they need (and want) to help them be successful at Penn State, rather than "back loading" services as we do with traditional age students.
- Many of Penn State's adult students are transfer students, many are applying late, and some are in non-degree status. To what extent are they benefiting from FTCAP and other advising services needed early in the application process?
- Faculty are an important part of the retention equation. We need our faculty to be as aware of adult learners in their classrooms as they are of other under-represented groups. Research on adult learners (for example by Knowles, Sims and Sims, and Hewitt) and our experience suggest that adult learners need and want a variety of teaching approaches. Our faculty will need to use inclusive language and to remember that spring break may just as well be an opportunity to paint the kitchen as to take a trip to Florida.
- Often we look at Penn State's adult learner population through a University Park-centric lens. Continuing Education at some campus locations has no credit offerings and those that may be available may be offered through a specific site or workplace.
- We must begin to stop targeting adult learners for a specific delivery arm of the University. Returning adult transfer students, our largest group of adult learners, are probably less interested in Continuing Education courses. We must quilt together a more coherent, efficient, and effective approach to attract adult learners to Penn State. Adult learners are not always who we think they are or want what we think they want. Our surveys have also shown that, for many Pennsylvania adult learners, Penn State is a family tradition.

### Will it be worthwhile to focus our attention on recruiting and retaining more adult learners at all our locations?

*Data analysis reveals:*

- Penn State adult learners have higher grade point averages than traditional-age students in every category.
- Penn State adult learners raise the bar in every class they participate in and attend.
- Penn State adult learners are more likely not to miss class and to be well prepared when they come to class.
- Adult learners are attracted to Penn State and those who apply are more likely to come than traditional-age applicants. Our data shows the yield rates for adult learners are close to 74 percent. [Adult Data Partnership based on enrollment management data available from the Data Warehouse; Center for Adult Learner data; the Division of Student Affairs Research and Assessment's Student Satisfaction Survey]

Adult learners are able to distinguish between what Penn State and other institutions have to offer. For our part, we must do more than simply agree that they *should* be here. We, every one of us, must work together to return adult learners to Penn State.

**Note:** Data and analysis for this article were provided by Charlene Harrison and Dan Stoicescu, Center for Adult Learner Services. Adult learner data are also available from the Center for Adult Learner at <http://www.sa.psu.edu/cals/data.shtml> and are available in the appendixes to the Commission for Adult Learners' *Status of the Undergraduate Adult Learner at Penn State: Position Paper*, Nov. 2004.