

Leadership Briefs

Adult Learners Toolkit

Tools cited are on the APLU website at [www.aplu.org/projects-and-initiatives/](http://www.aplu.org/projects-and-initiatives/urban-initiatives/)

Adult learners, many of them transferring from two-year colleges, present challenges for institutions attuned to working with more traditional students. Some 22% of the 26,000 undergraduates at the University of Akron identify as adults 25-years of age or older; most adult learners at PSU are community college transfers aged 22 or older. The Adult Learners Toolkit, described herein, includes evaluation, management, and tracking tools developed at Portland State University (PSU) and The University of Akron to improve adult student progress.

Both institutions have taken steps to better understand these students, manage their academic success and career skills mastery, and build institutional capacity that supports adult students' timely and cost effective advancement towards degree completion.

Evaluating Adult Learner Experiences

Adult learners are on track to become the new majority in postsecondary education. Yet campus programs, policies, and procedures are not keeping pace with the experiences or issues impeding the success of adult students. Some of these issues include traditional institutional course scheduling that often conflicts with adult students' abilities to attend school, hold a full or part-time job and manage child care; or the lack of access to

suitable advising to prevent accumulation of costly credits that do not move a student towards degree completion.

Key Recommendations

- Establish evaluation processes to fully understand the needs and success issues of adult learners.
- Learn as much as possible about adult learners' previous academic experiences and flexibility needs and how they align with degree completion at your institution.
- Assess the capacity of your institution to disrupt accepted practices to support the needs of adult students.

Tools: Evaluation and Program Readiness

- Project Management Practices Guide (PSU)
- Business Model Analysis (PSU)
- Adult Learners and Flexibility (PSU)

Assessing Institutional Readiness

With adult learners having varied needs, internal stakeholders at institutions must collaborate, assess available resources, and develop strategies that align with institutional priorities. Portland is utilizing its campus-wide student success initiative reThink PSU to



COLLABORATING FOR CHANGE

Collaborating for Change is a six-year initiative implemented by USU and APLU, and supported by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, to work with urban serving universities to plan and implement transformational—often disruptive—approaches to advance student success efforts. These efforts are particularly focused on helping high need and traditionally at-risk students while keeping costs down, reexamining business models, and reaching deeper into the community.

THE COALITION OF URBAN SERVING UNIVERSITIES

The Coalition of Urban Serving Universities (USU) is a president-led organization committed to enhancing urban university engagement to increase prosperity and opportunity in the nation's cities and to tackling key urban challenges. The Coalition includes 43 public urban research universities representing all U.S. geographic regions. The USU agenda focuses on creating a competitive workforce, building strong communities, and improving the health of a diverse population. The Coalition of Urban Universities (USU) has partnered with the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU) to establish an Office of Urban Initiatives, housed at APLU, to jointly lead an urban agenda for the nation's public universities.

THE ASSOCIATION OF PUBLIC AND LAND-GRANT UNIVERSITIES

The Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU) is a research, policy and advocacy organization representing 234 public research universities, land-grant institutions, state university systems, and affiliated organizations. Founded in 1887, APLU is North America's oldest higher education association with member institutions in all 50 U.S. states, the District of Columbia, four U.S. territories, Canada, and Mexico. Annually, member campuses enroll 4.7 million undergraduates and 1.3 million graduate students, award 1.1 million degrees, employ 1.3 million faculty and staff, and conduct \$41 billion in university-based research.

collaborate with internal and external stakeholders to support adult learners. Efforts include flexible degree programs for adult learners, incenting faculty flexibility, and implementing early interventions to prevent/reduce excessive credit accumulation and unnecessary student costs.

The University of Akron's efforts are also campus-wide, supporting adult students and its general student population. Technology-assisted learning is helping reduce general education costs, offer more competency-based education, and pilot a certificate program in Spanish skills mastery for first responders working in the region.

Key Recommendations

- Assess the capacity and adaptability of the institution to support the needs of adult learners.
- Develop planning and management tools that help evaluate, manage, and track institutional progress for adult learners.
- Help adult students plan and track their own progress towards degree completion and skills mastery with tools that make information easily accessible and understandable.

Tools: Assessment and Tracking Progress

- Adult Learner Student Life Cycle (Akron)
- Transfer Degree Maps (PSU): www.pdx.edu/transferstudent/transfer-degree-maps
- reTHINK PSU Road Map (PSU)
- Project Status Report (PSU)

Tools: Project Management

- Project Management Practices Guide (PSU)
- Project Management framework and templates (PSU)
- Provost's Challenge website (PSU)
- Example of storytelling by faculty (PSU)
- Project website example

Adult Learners: Higher Education's Nontraditional Students

“Although adult learners are the new majority in postsecondary education, most campus operations and student success pathways focus on the needs of “traditional” students 18–22 years of age.

Only 16% of full-time undergraduate students residing on campuses fit the traditional profile.”

— *Hidden in Plain Sight: Adult Learners Forge a New Tradition in Higher Education*, Peter J. Stokes

A frequently cited 2002 National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) report notes seven characteristics of “nontraditional” students that represent many adult learners. Students may have one or more of these characteristics: 1) entry to college delayed by at least one year following high school, 2) having dependents, 3) being a single parent, 4) being employed full time, 5) being financially independent, 6) attending college part time, and 7) not having a high school diploma.

Portland State University: reTHINK PSU

reTHINK PSU is Portland State's largest campus-wide transformational effort, targeting more than 23,000 students. It is designed to serve more students, with better outcomes, while containing costs via curricular innovation, community engagement and effective use of technology.

Issues effecting adult learners (e.g 22 years of age or older) include accumulating excessive credits without obtaining degrees (in some cases students accrue 25% more credits than they

need to graduate) and increasing degree completion. PSU is working to gain a better understanding of the transfer student experience to help these adult learners persist from their first to second year at PSU. The school is also improving student advising using proactive interventions and predictive analytics, and is creating more flexibility to address the curricular and service needs of adult learners.

The University of Akron: Unbundling Higher Education

Akron's transformational efforts for adult learners include unbundling content delivery; improving assessment and credentialing; improving student success via GenEd Core, a pilot program exploring a low-cost option for offering general education courses; a new learning system called Forte that moves learning from individual credit courses to collaborative interactive instruction; using technology to

improve how students acquire knowledge; and offering technology assisted competency-based education (CBE) that allows students to choose learning activity best suited to their success.

The institution's Certificate of Advanced Spanish for Health Professions and First Responders is a successful pilot program designed for working adults.



BRIGHT IDEAS

- a technology-assisted CBE pilot program (Akron)
- GenEd Core: www.uakron.edu/core/

Building Partnerships with Vendors/Consultants

Building partnerships with campus leaders, external vendors and partners (e.g. local employers) is a key strategy in supporting adult learners.

Key Recommendations

- Include assessment of relevant vendors and community partners in early planning efforts.

- Make career readiness/jobs skill mastery an integral part of success planning for adult students.

Tools: Community-building with Vendors/Consultants

- D2L Technology Consultant (Akron): www.brightspace.com/
- Certificate of Advanced Spanish for the Health Professions and First Responders: www.uakron.edu/modlang/hp.dot

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USU AND APLU

- USU Leadership, including **Mark Becker**, President of Georgia State University, and Chair, USU Board; **Mark Rosenberg**, President of Florida International University, and Chair, USU Student Performance Strand; the **USU Board of Directors** and those who actively engage in the **USU Student Performance Strand**.
- **Shari Garmise**, Vice President of Urban Initiatives, and the whole USU staff.



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