Adult Baccalaureate Completion/Distance Education – Best Practices

Public institutions today are confronted with an increasingly competitive environment and must be able to address the multiple issues of college access, affordability, and completion across a range of student populations. By 2018, 59 percent of all jobs in Maine will require a post-secondary education. National goals, including those from President Obama, call for 60% of all adults to have achieved a degree by 2025. In Maine, the “traditional” student demographic will continue to decline over the next 7-10 years while the “new” traditional (or non-traditional) market will grow a bit and then stabilize.

A highly qualified workforce is central to any state’s workforce and economic development. Individuals with professional certificates and postsecondary education degrees at the associate’s, bachelor’s, and graduate levels are projected to experience higher levels of employment and wage growth than those without. Recognizing that 230,000 adults in Maine have some college but no degree, is imperative that a strategic plan with clear action steps and goals, formed collaboratively across key stakeholders within the University of Maine System and within Maine, be formulated and implemented.

Examples of best practice within adult degree completion exist in part at most of Maine’s public universities. As was the case with the credit transfer initiative, these practices exist in isolation from each other and have not been implemented to scale at all of our institutions or embedded within any policy structure, either within the UMS or more broadly, such that they can be implemented statewide.

It is clear from all available research that there are a variety of best practices being employed by states as they grapple with increasing college completion, specifically among those adults with some college. It is also clear that this is an area still in development and ongoing assessment will be required to determine which initiative will have the most impact. When considering best practices, it is important to recognize that the cultural context, educational climate, mission and social setting of an educational system will influence the success of adult degree completion programs and should be taken into consideration as any solution is implemented. Based on the research, the following themes emerge as best practice:
• **Student Service and Support**
  
  **Institutional:**
  - Developing a single point of contact for returning adults – “Concierge” services
  - Providing mentoring support either as a component of the “concierge” service or through their academic major
  - Reviewing policies and procedures related to student services and support – identification of barriers and formulating solutions
  - Serving the multicampus student – reviewing policies and procedures as they relate to students enrolled on more than one campus
  
  **State level:**
  - Identifying appropriate grant programs at the state level that provide either financial assistance for adult students or provide funding for student support services

• **Marketing and Outreach**
  
  **Institutional and State level:**
  - Identifying potential students, both first time and those with some college, at the institutional level and through appropriate state agencies that target adults
  - Tailored marketing and outreach to students regarding degree completion opportunities
  - Cultivating key stakeholder support, both institutional and state level, in promoting opportunities for adults to come to/return to college

• **Academic Programs**
  
  **Institutional:**
  - Identifying/offering programs available on campus for place-bound, time-limited learners that provide the flexibility to fulfill degree requirements
  - Identifying/offering programs available via Distance education/online
  - Expanding degree completion opportunities through the collaborative offering of degrees
  - Reviewing academic policies and procedures – identifying barriers and formulating solutions

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1 Michelau, D. and Lane, P. “Bringing Adults Back to College: Designing and Implementing a Statewide Concierge Model” Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (November 2010)
2 “Pathways to Success: Report to Congress Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance” February, 2012
4 HigherEdInsight.com, p. 3
5 Western Interstate Commission, “Going the Distance in Adult College Completion: Lessons from the Non-traditional No More Project”, p. 45, June 2012
6 Ibid
**State Level:**
- Involving key business and community stakeholders in the identification and development of certificates and degrees needed for the workforce

- **Financial Aid/Tuition Support**
  
  **Institutional:**
  - Identifying any financial aid policies that may be a barrier and formulation of solutions
  - Ensuring that there are multiple payment options for students

  **State Level:**
  - Funding for adults returning to school is identified as one of the key barriers. Work with key stakeholders in state government and within business and industry to develop scholarships/grants to support adult degree completion and to develop partnerships to enhance employer tuition support programs

- **Prior Learning Assessment and Transfer**
  
  **Institutional:**
  - Transportability of PLA credit between campuses
  - Consistency across campuses in the awarding of PLA
  - Offering the full menu of PLA

  **State Level:**
  - Develop partnerships with the business community in ways that support the PLA process, e.g. portfolio development, assessment, academic expectations, etc.

- **Partnerships (cross-campus, with businesses, with other state organizations)**
  
  **State Level:**
  - Working collaboratively with Adult Education; statewide organizations working with employers in degree completion (in Maine, Maine Employers Initiative); Foundations and others (Maine Community Foundation, MELMAC, Lumina, etc.); Legislature (for any statewide legislated policies)

- **Assessment, Evaluation and Research**
  
  - Data, both statewide and institution-based, on adult degree completion
  - Assessment of initiatives

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7 Ibid