

COMMISSION FOR ADULT LEARNERS

ANNUAL REPORT 2007-08

The Commission for Adult Learners (CAL) celebrated its tenth anniversary in 2007-08. Over the past ten years CAL has been committed to improving services and the learning environment for adult learners at Penn State.

It was appropriate in this landmark year to celebrate the past accomplishments of the Commission while also updating and streamlining its structure and procedures. Experts from within the Penn State Community were invited to brief the members of CAL on a variety of topics. These presentations helped the members of the Commission identify new activities to undertake in the future to fulfill its mission. These activities are reviewed below.

Structural and Procedural Adjustments

A number of structural and procedural concerns emerged in the prior academic year. Five major concerns were addressed in 2007-08 to update the organizational structure and procedures.

First, the CAL committee structure had remained relatively unchanged for several years. Some committees were no longer needed because their work had been completed, and new needs had emerged. Consequently, the Data Collection and Institutional Infrastructure Committee and the Recruitment and Retention Committee were eliminated. Also, the Faculty Engagement to Recruit and Retain Adult Learners Committee (referred to subsequently as the “Faculty Engagement Committee”) was created to increase faculty representation on CAL and address the challenges associated with finding ways to increase faculty interest in, and support of, adult learners.

Second, it had become apparent that future issues to be addressed by CAL could be more effectively handled if some CAL members were selected from those in senior leadership positions with administrative decision-making authority. Members with this authority would be able to effectively guide the development of recommendations for policy and procedural changes by CAL, and to act quickly on these recommendations. As a consequence, new members included the University Registrar and the Executive Director of Student Aid.

Third, with CAL members representing 20 campuses, including 19 campuses outside University Park (UP), attendance at meetings in University Park was often problematic for commonwealth campus faculty and staff members. Changes were needed to increase attendance at meetings when schedule conflicts made travel to UP impossible. This was approached in two ways. The past schedule of CAL meetings was carefully reviewed to determine whether the number of meetings could be reduced. Based on this review, the annual day-long retreat to introduce new members and orient them to the work of the Commission was eliminated. Instead, the orientation was combined with the first meeting of the academic year. Similarly, the final meeting of the Commission in June was combined with the annual meeting with the CAL Sponsors, and the presentations of perspectives by adult learners were included in the April meeting instead of scheduling an evening dinner event with the sponsors. In addition, options for using technology

to support attendance were explored. The CAL meetings were scheduled in a room with telephone and polycom connections to permit members to participate in CAL meetings when they could not travel to UP.

Fourth, the Commission reviewed the objectives and criteria used in the past to award grants to support activities aimed at adult learners. In prior years the Commission had awarded a large number of small grants (e.g., \$250 to \$500). A review of these activities indicated that most of the activities undertaken could have been supported by the campus or department without funding from the Commission. The Awards and Incentives Committee chaired by Charlene Harrison, Director of Adult Learner Services, decided to focus instead on encouraging significant innovations to improve services to adult learners. The objective was to provide seed money to cover the start-up costs of projects which campuses or departments could not otherwise afford, but could continue once the project was established. Project requests to CAL for up to \$2,000 were encouraged. There was a required match of \$1 for every \$2 from CAL, for a maximum match of \$1,000. This change provided a total of \$3,000 in seed money for innovations, and resulted in fewer but larger grants. Eight grants were awarded: seven to Commonwealth Campuses and one to University Park. Reports evaluating the impact of the innovation will be submitted to the Commission. Also, sessions explaining the successful programs will be offered at future Hendrick Best Practices for Adult Learners Conferences.

Finally, the reorganization of Penn State Outreach in summer 2007 placed the Center for Adult Learners under the oversight of the Director of Adult Learner Advocacy and Enrollment Services. (The Director also serves as an ex officio member of CAL.) One benefit of this change was to provide staff support to conduct the detailed investigative work that had been done previously by the members of the CAL committees. This change was designed to free CAL members to focus on the identification of issues and concerns and development of policy recommendations.

The implications of the organizational change in Penn State Outreach for the work of the Commission were explored during 2007-08. However, continued work in 2008-09 will be required to learn how to most effectively use these staff support resources. Furthermore, it will be important for the Commission to continue working with the staff in the Office of Adult Learner Advocacy and Enrollment Services to implement the report to the Provost of The Committee to Attract and Retain Adult Students at Penn State entitled "Post-Secondary Adult Learner Environment at The Pennsylvania State University (May 2006) and its associated "Best Practices" report, as well as the December 2004 CAL Position Paper entitled "Status of the Undergraduate Adult Learner at Penn State." (To review these reports visit http://www.outreach.psu.edu/commission/files/Best_Practices.pdf; <http://www.outreach.psu.edu/commission/files/CAL-FINAL.Position.Paper2.pdf>.)

Improving Communications

Over the past few years the members of the Commission struggled with the challenge of improving two types of communication: providing better information about educational opportunities at Penn State more effectively and efficiently to adult learners, and finding ways to share information about the work of CAL within Penn State. The Commission worked in prior

years with Web designers in Outreach to define the content and features of two Web sites to improve both types of communication. This work continued to be guided by CAL and was completed in 2007-08 with the introduction of two Web sites: one targeted at the needs of adult learners, and the other to provide information to the Penn State Community. The Commission also sponsored the tenth annual Hendrick Conference to share best practices for working with adult learners within Penn State.

Better Information for Adult Learners

One important objective has been to provide “one stop shopping” for adult learners interested in Penn State. The new Web site provides links to answers to the typical questions asked by adult learners. It provides detailed information to help the adult learner determine what Penn State can offer, and addresses the often confusing issue of how credit can be awarded for prior learning, including transfer credits. (See *Penn State for Adult Learners- It Shows* at [http://www.outreach.psu.edu/adult-learners/.](http://www.outreach.psu.edu/adult-learners/))

Once the *It Shows* web site was completed, the Web sites at the 19 Commonwealth Campuses were reviewed to determine how well they served the information needs of adults. Many were found to be poorly designed to answer questions from adult learners. It therefore was recommended to the Campus Academic Officers (CAOs) that their campuses’ Web sites be linked in an easy-to-find manner with the Penn State *It Shows* Web site.

Improving Information about CAL within Penn State

The second Web site was developed to explain the work of the Commission, provide information about its activities, and serve as a repository for reports and documents related to its work. (See [http://www.outreach.psu.edu/commission/.](http://www.outreach.psu.edu/commission/)) The Commission Web site also is linked to the *It Shows* site. In fall 2008 information developed by the Faculty Engagement Committee to help faculty understand better adult learners and the challenges faced by these students will be added to this site.

In addition, four other activities were undertaken to support and facilitate communication on matters affecting adult learners within Penn State. First, in the Fall Semester 2007 the CAL chair and two CAL members met with the CAOs of the 19 Commonwealth Campuses. This meeting provided an opportunity to educate the CAOs about the work of the Commission, and to discuss their issues and concerns related to adult learners enrolled at commonwealth campus campuses. Three important concerns were identified by the CAOs. The first key concern was finding ways to reduce or eliminate “bureaucratic” impediments (i.e., to reduce or remove real impediments, and provide correct information to adult learners about “perceived” impediments) to streamline the admission process for adult learners. The second key concern was finding ways to reduce both the money and time costs for adult learners to apply to Penn State and complete their degrees. A third issue was finding ways to reduce the campus expenses for remedial education, particularly in English and math. These concerns will continue to guide CAL work priorities.

Second, as in prior years, representatives of the Commission met with members of the Board of Trustees. The work of CAL was explained and questions were answered during a breakfast meeting in January 2008. The CAL representatives included Sharon Christ, Sandra Gleason, Charlene Harrison, Theodora Jankowski, Paul Rutter, and Anne Rohrbach.

In addition, the Hendrick Best Practices for Adult Learners Conference was held on May 5, 2008 at the Penn State Conference Center. The planning committee chaired by William Curley, Executive Director of Statewide Continuing Education, selected the theme “Celebrating the Past, Envisioning the Future” to focus on the tenth anniversary of the Commission. The keynote speaker was Dr. Edward Gordon, an internationally known expert on training, careers and education related to economic development and business. He discussed “Adult Learning at the 2010 Crossroad.” There were 240 faculty and staff participants from across Penn State. Each participant selected three break-out sessions presented by Penn State faculty and staff on best practices on topics ranging from pedagogy to new student orientation and advising. The annual recipients of the Superior Service to Adult Learners Award and Outstanding Adult Learn Recruitment and Retention Program Award also were announced. (For more information about the conference visit [http://www.outreach.psu.edu/programs/hendrick/.](http://www.outreach.psu.edu/programs/hendrick/))

Finally, on June 4, 2008 the Commission scheduled a working lunch with its sponsors. The Commission chair and the chairs of the CAL committees reported on the work undertaken in 2007-08. Following these reports, the sponsors were invited to identify their concerns and topics on which they would like the Commission to focus in the coming year. This list of topics will be discussed by CAL in Fall 2008.

Two communication challenges will continue into the next year. One will be the continued development of the network of Adult Enrollment Coordinators created at the campuses in 2007-08. Of particular importance will be improving the information available to the AECs to assist adult learners from the time they contact a campus to learn about educational opportunities through graduation. A second challenge will be to formalize the position of liaison between the Commission and the Penn State Faculty Senate. When future CAL recommendations affect Senate policies on academic, curricular and student matters, it will be important to have a formal and open communication channel between these two organizations.

Engaging Faculty

A new challenge for the Commission in 2007-08 was focusing on ways to improve faculty engagement in the recruitment and retention of adult learners. The work of the new Faculty Engagement Committee was begun under the leadership of the co-chairs of the committee: Theodora Jankowski, Director of Academic Affairs, Penn State Wilkes-Barre, and Robert Farrell, Associate Professor of Microbiology, Penn State York. Because this was a new committee, research and discussion was undertaken in the Fall Semester 2007 to determine the appropriate foci of this committee.

Two initial major projects were undertaken. (1) Information about adult learners was compiled with the goal of adding it to the online *Penn State Faculty Handbook* as an appendix. This document will be forwarded to the Office of the Provost for review, and also added to the CAL Web site in the coming year. (2) A short survey of Penn State faculty was developed to identify beliefs and attitudes toward adult learners that may negatively affect the engagement of faculty in the recruitment and retention of adult learners. The survey was pilot tested in spring 2008, and will be conducted in fall 2008. The results will be shared with the Schreyer Institute for Teaching

Excellence to guide the design of workshops and/or with other groups to identify appropriate interventions to assist and guide faculty engagement with adult learners.

Fact-based Decision Making

Background briefings on a number of important issues affecting adult learners were organized prior to considering the development of recommendations for policy and/or procedural changes. Of particular interest to the Commission was gaining a better understanding of the transfer credit award process, the types of discipline and degree programs of interest to adults, the preferred delivery features for programs (e.g., online or evening courses), financial aid for adult learners (both part-time and full-time), and methods to engage faculty at all Penn State campuses more effectively with adults in undergraduate programs. The information presented will serve as the basis to analyze further these issues and develop data-based recommendations in the coming year. It will be important for the Commission to continue to advocate on behalf of adult learners for expanded educational program offerings provided at convenient times and locations.

Example: the Award of Transfer Credits

In the recent past a number of issues “perceived” as having negative effects on adult learners have been brought to the attention of the Commission. However, to determine what is “myth,” and what is “fact,” it was necessary to invite Penn State experts on key topics to provide a balanced and objective explanation of these issues.

One example investigated in depth this year was the negative perception of the process by which Penn State University awards credit for prior learning, particularly transfer credits. To illustrate, it had been reported to CAL on numerous occasions that the transfer credit process employed by Penn State is more cumbersome, unclear, and time consuming than that of our competitor institutions. Consequently, it was argued, Penn State lost potential adult learners to competitors.

After presentations by Penn State experts who manage the transfer credit process, the Commission members realized that the Penn State review of credits earned elsewhere is relatively efficient and relatively flexible in the application of transfer credits toward the completion of a degree. However, improvements are possible, including moving the review process from a paper to an online process so the review can be completed more quickly, and providing clear explanations about the process on the *It Shows* Web site. The Commission therefore recommended to the University Registrar the creation of a university-wide online E-Petition Course Substitution System modeled on the system developed in the College of Health and Human Development. Also, the Commission will continue to seek ways to more effectively help adult students understand the process for awarding credit and guide them through the process. The exploration of related issues will continue in 2008-09, and will guide the addition of new information on the *It Shows* Web site and training for advisors and Adult Enrollment Coordinators.

Topics covered in 2007-08

- Sept. 12: Craig Weidemann, Vice President for Outreach, and Wayne Smutz, Associate Vice President for Academic Outreach and Executive Director, Continuing and Distance

Education, “Re-organization of Outreach to Enhance Services to Adult Learners and Improve the Effectiveness and Efficiency of these Services”

- Oct. 10: Nancy Herron, Associate Dean for Academic Programs, OVPCC; William Curley, Executive Director of Statewide Continuing Education; Annette Fetterolf, Program Manager, Statewide Continuing Education,” Programming Options and Opportunities for Adult Learners”
- Nov. 14: Angela Linse, Executive Director of the Schreyer Institute, “Exploring Teaching and Learning Perspectives on Adult Learners”
- Dec. 13: Anne Rohrbach, Director, Admissions Services and Evaluation, Undergraduate Admissions, and Karen Schultz, University Registrar, and others, “ Overview of the Transfer Credit Evaluation Process”
- Feb. 13: Martha Jordan, Director of Adult Learner Advocacy and Enrollment Services, and William Curley, “Updates on the Adult Learners Points of Entry Task Force”; Sharon Christ, Director, Student and Enrollment services, and Charlene Harrison, Director of Adult Learner Services, “Services available to Adult Learners”
- March 19: Anna Griswold, Assistant Vice President for Undergraduate Education, Executive Director of Student Aid, “Overview of Financial Aid for Adult Learners”
- April 9: Peter Rubba, Director of Academic Affairs, World Campus, “Penn State World Campus Update”
- June 4: Anne Rohrbach, Director, Admissions Services and Evaluation, Undergraduate Admissions, “Report on how competitor institutions communicate transfer credit options to adult learners”; Rachel Stover, Assistant Director of Institutional Data and Enrollments, “Update on adult learner enrollments.”

Recommendation for Policy HR-36

It was brought to the attention of the Commission that due to the expansion of online courses Penn State staff now have expanded opportunities to enroll in courses which can be taken outside of normal business hours. Enrollment in face-to-face courses and online courses could permit a staff member to complete a degree more quickly. In response to these changing opportunities a request was sent to Billie Willits, Vice President, Office of Human Resources, to review limitations on the number of academic credits that can be taken each year by Policy HR-36 Educational Privileges for Faculty, Staff and Retirees. (See <http://guru.psu.edu/policies/OHR/hr36.html>.)

In Appreciation

The members of the Commission for Adult Learners are committed to improving not only access for adult learners to Penn State, but also their success rate at Penn State. The Commission

extends its appreciation to its four sponsors who have provided the financial support for CAL's work on these important goals: Dr. John Romano, Vice President for Commonwealth Campuses; Dr. Robert Pangborn, Vice President and Dean of Undergraduate Education; Dr. Craig Weidemann, Vice President for Outreach; and Ms. Gail Hurley, Interim Vice President Office of Student Affairs. Also, Ms. Martha Jordan, Director of Adult Learner Advocacy and Enrollment Services, provided invaluable support and guidance during the year. Her staff assistants (Cathy Guzik, Jeanine Emigh, Linda Saylor, and Judy Wills) effectively handled the communications with CAL members and planned the CAL meetings. Without the support of these people the Commission could not have accomplished all that it did in 2007-08.

Respectfully submitted by Dr. Sandra E. Gleason

Chair 2007-08, Commission for Adult Learners