

**Commission for Adult Learners
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Summary of the June 2001 Campus Focus Groups

In June 2001, the Commission for Adult Learners responded to its sponsors' request to conduct three focus groups to learn what strategies, activities, and policies are employed by those Penn State campuses that are successful in recruiting and retaining adult learners. These focus groups were undertaken as an exploratory endeavor to suggest potential recruitment and retention strategies and to provide direction for future studies.

The three campuses selected—Harrisburg, Shenango, and York—each have a large percentage of adult learners. At each campus, from five to eight faculty, senior staff members, and administrators whose responsibilities include serving adult learners were convened for a structured, facilitated discussion of approximately one hour. Because the goal was to gain information on campus faculty, staff, and administrative perspectives, no students were included.

This report summarizes the findings of the three focus groups. Except as noted, the findings apply to all three campuses studied.

General Perceptions regarding Adult Learners

Participants described adult learners as:

- practical
- wanting a product (i.e., a certificate or a degree)
- seeking quality
- conscious of getting the most for their time and money
- needing substantial assistance and attention, particularly with the advising process
- requiring flexibility and understanding regarding their work and family responsibilities, including their impact on attendance and ability to meet deadlines
- wanting programs and courses that fit their interests and career/life stages (e.g., nursing, IST, liberal arts)

Service as a Key to Recruiting and Retaining Adult Learners

All three campuses expressed pride in the service they provide to adult learners, citing these strategies:

- Campus personnel walk students from office to office to help them through the registration process.
- Particularly during weeks in which adult traffic may be anticipated, offices are open extended hours, including evenings and Saturdays, to accommodate adult learners.
- Staff members, many of whom have been with their campus for several years, are key to serving adults. They understand the system and go the extra mile to provide personalized service with a smile.
- Recruitment and retention is a team effort. Everyone from the first staff contact to the faculty member in the classroom shares responsibility for making their campus a campus of choice for adult learners.
- These campuses do not single out adult learners, but give everyone the same kind of service, believing that if they “do the right things, the money will follow.”
- Campus personnel have a “can do” attitude and strive to make programs work for students.
- Campus personnel understand the relationship of Continuing Education to degree programs.
- At York Campus, the bursar accepts payment for both credit and non-credit enrollment, in the belief that keeping these functions together makes sense despite difference in student status.

The Importance of Community Contacts

Harrisburg and York Campuses each have a wide network of contacts in their service area, allowing them to keep abreast of industry and community developments, and opportunistically to deliver programs in response to those developments. Their local environmental scanning efforts are strong.

Marketing Strategies

Focus group participants at all locations stressed the importance of knowing where the market is and targeting that market specifically, but also noted that the best advertising is word-of-mouth. (College Board data indicate that 60 to 70 percent of students select a college or university based on word-of-mouth.)

The campuses studied use the following marketing strategies:

- targeted direct mailings to specific companies, industries, and other groups (e.g., veterans) (York, Harrisburg)
- weekly contact with a staff person at an important feeder school (e.g., Harrisburg Area Community College)
- phone calls to veterans (York)
- an evening program, the Penn State Connection (York)
- use of current students to encourage prospective students with visits by teachers enrolled in graduate program to school districts (York)
- letters from school superintendents to potential teacher program students (York)

- long term relationships with particular companies and/or agencies; e.g., Harley-Davidson and AMP at York, governmental agencies at Harrisburg

Recruitment Strategies

Each of the three campuses takes specific steps to facilitate and encourage adult learner enrollments, including:

- Institute transfer agreements and dual enrollment agreements between schools, so that students from other colleges find it easy to come to their campus without excessive paperwork. (Harrisburg)
- Implement portfolio assessment to help adult learners enter the program (Harrisburg and Shenango), and to give students credit for experiences gained at least partially through non-credit courses. (York)
- Creatively find ways to help adult learners with their course payments; for example, allowing students to pay for Continuing Education courses by the last day of class. (York)
- Recruit families. Recruiting adults may incorporate recruitment of their children, and vice versa. It is not always clear who is interested initially and who will eventually register for a course
- Use step-up opportunities – from one certificate to another and certificates to associate degrees

Offering the Right Programs

All three campuses find that programs leading to a career path (e.g., nursing) attract adult learners. Some specific programming strategies were cited:

- Plan programs that will initially draw students; as they complete initial programs, attract them to the next program or degree level.
- Being part of a College allows greater flexibility in course and program offerings (e.g., Project Teach, IST, upcoming liberal arts evening degree, all at York).
- Use “modest” programs (e.g., day care, extra activities like Kids College) that may not generate revenue but are the first step toward getting students to stay. (Harrisburg, York)
- Attract adult learners to program enrollment through Continuing Education, which the campuses view as a “feeder” into their degree and nondegree programs. These campuses have integrated Continuing Education with other enrollment programs and with traditional registration functions.
- Recognize the importance of certificate programs in encouraging students to pursue more education, and capitalize on state-mandated certificate programs (e.g., secondary social studies, early childhood education). (Harrisburg)

- Offer courses “off-site,” targeting employers with tuition reimbursement programs and tailoring course offerings to employees’ professional development needs. (York, Harrisburg)

Course Scheduling

The variety of scheduling strategies used to attract and serve adult learners includes:

- The number of course meetings may be reduced, with additional communication taking place via Internet chat rooms.
- A high percentage of courses are offered during non-traditional hours, including evenings, early morning, after 9 a.m. when children are in school, and weekends.
- Some courses are offered in pairs, others are offered in the evening on a rotating basis.
- Courses are offered at a variety of community locations.
- Offer a course one night a week for three hours

Campus Climate

Participants at all three locations discussed the importance of campus climate, and noted that their campuses do not look like traditional college campuses.

- Adults attract more adults. The number of adults on campus encourages adult learner enrollment and re-enrollment.
- Evening programs such as Wok, Sizzle, and Roll (Harrisburg) and Soup Bowl (York) offer adult learners an informal opportunity meet each other.
- Evening campus food services and related services such as child care are important for adult learners.
- The library and other facilities convey the quality of the campus to adult learners, and help retain and recruit faculty interested in working at a campus and with adult students
- A Dean’s List for part-time students recognizes adult learners’ accomplishments.
- Honor cords at graduation for the adult honor society recognize outstanding adult learners. (Harrisburg)
- Student Affairs is aware of and responds to the needs of adult learners.

Faculty

Campuses should be proactive in attracting, preparing, and supporting faculty members to serve adult learners.

- Students value instructor flexibility.
- One faculty member may have as many as 50 adult learners to advise; these students take a lot of time and need a lot of attention. (York, Shenango)

- Faculty members can make more money at State System of Higher Education schools, an impact that now is being felt in faculty recruitment.
- Most Penn State campuses hire faculty members with the understanding that they will teach adults. Instructors who are not teaching well or responsive to adults are seen as a detriment and are weeded out as soon as possible.

We are Penn State

- The Penn State name and reputation are a plus, but the growing cost of tuition and competition between Penn State locations (e.g., Harrisburg and Schuylkill) are perceived as deterrents.
- Adult learners recognize that Penn State credits transfer to other schools if they have to go elsewhere.

Retention

Participants observed that adult learner retention is not well defined. Adults don't fit the traditional mode because they stop in and stop out, often moving nontraditionally through the system. Thus they may appear not to be retained when in fact they are continuing their education, albeit at their own pace.

Socio-Economic Climate

The service area of each Penn State location is a key factor in determining the likelihood of its success attracting adult learners.

- York and Harrisburg have positive situations, but also work hard to position themselves to be a player.
- All three campuses commented on the conservative, traditional nature of their wider communities. They respond by preparing/offering programs (e.g., nursing, business, education) that will attract this population.
- These campuses attract many first-generation college students, and many adult learners are second-generation college students, following their children to college.
- Participants estimate that 96 percent of their students live and/or work within an easy commute to their campus.
- York Campus personnel are concerned about recent publicity on race issues.

Data Creation and Use

The creation, availability, and use of adult learner data is of interest because of its potential to assess topics ranging from the University's recruitment and retention of adults to adult learners' perceptions of their Penn State experience, and to provide information that will lead to improved service to these students.

- Campuses studied use data regarding an adult learner's employer and schools previously attended.
- Except for York, the campuses studied rarely use the Data Warehouse, citing staff assistants' lack of expertise as the reason. They note that training programs are difficult and too fast-paced, so that people must take the course several times to understand how to use the Data Warehouse at even a superficial level. The campuses would like to use the data if they could access it.
- Surveys are conducted locally. (York)

Campus Leadership

Participants noted that the role of the Campus CEO in setting the tone of the campus is crucial. Harrisburg and York have (and have had) leaders who support and understand the efforts of their staff in attracting and recruiting adult learners. Less supportive or frequently changing leadership have made it difficult to recruit adult learners.

At York front line staff and a campus faculty leader representative meet bi-weekly, which participants see as helpful in establishing a collegial working environment that is key to their success. Shenango participants commented that they had not met together as a group, except at this focus group, for a couple years, but they are closely linked by the proximity of their offices.

Next Steps

The findings of these focus groups suggest a number of strategies that could help Penn State recruit, retain, and serve adult learners. Because of the exploratory nature of the focus groups, it is expected that those charged with or concerned about expanding and enhancing the University's adult learner population will discuss the appropriateness and potential adaptation of these strategies at their locations.

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