

PENNSTATE



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**STATUS OF THE UNDERGRADUATE ADULT LEARNER
AT PENN STATE**

POSITION PAPER

December 2004

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STATUS OF THE UNDERGRADUATE ADULT LEARNER AT PENN STATE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Six years ago, the Commission for Adult Learners was formed by four senior officers of the University. In order to learn more about Penn State's adult learners, the Commission in conjunction with the Center for Adult Learner Services and others has engaged in several efforts to learn more about the University's adult applicants, adults offered admission who did not enroll, new adult enrollees, adults currently enrolled, and campuses with high adult numbers. Before his retirement, William W. Asbury, one of the Commission's inaugural sponsors, suggested that the Commission prepare a report on the status of Penn State's undergraduate adult learners. As a result, this position paper was written to share our findings.

Using data generated largely by an Adult Data Partnership, of which the Commission was a part, this report begins by addressing a series of institutional myths that unfortunately have contributed to a lack of understanding about Penn State's adult learners. We have learned that over 80% of the University's undergraduate adults seek degrees, and approximately 60% of new adult enrollees seeking undergraduate degrees are full-time students. Ninety-seven percent of non-degree undergraduate adult students who enroll for the first time are part-time students, with 66% of them taking one course; the majority of the University's undergraduate adult students who take courses offered by Continuing Education and the World Campus are non-degree students. By traditional-age student standards, adults are "late" applicants for both admission and financial aid which impacts their access to, and ability to finance, higher education. Adult applicants for undergraduate admission are more often transfer than freshman applicants; hence those who enroll are concerned about transfer credit issues and are not served by new-student programs offered to freshmen. For the 2003 undergraduate admissions cycle, 82% of adult undergraduate applicants sought admission to a physical campus location; the remainder requested the World Campus. About half of new adult enrollees are 29 years of age and younger. Once enrolled, adult learners in the aggregate earn higher grades than traditional-age students; and their graduation rates are comparable after four years.

Despite growth of adult learners nationally, Pennsylvania's post-secondary enrollment of all adult learners decreased 4% from 1993 to 2003; and the credit participation rate of Pennsylvanians 25 to 34 years old was almost half that of the national average. Penn State's undergraduate adult enrollments dropped 24% between 1993 and 2003 in contrast to Pennsylvania's 15% decrease in undergraduate adult enrollment between 1993 and 2003. Given the forecast of decreasing numbers of high school graduates, Penn State's source of traditional-age students, it is important that Penn State reverse its adult learner drain. However, this will be difficult to achieve because of Penn State's rapidly increasing educational costs, increased competition for the adult learner market, a legacy of institutional decision making that has been insufficiently informed by knowledge of adult learners' needs, and heavy reliance on the Continuing Education and World Campus delivery options to recruit adults rather than an institutional focus on adult recruitment. Added to these institutional realities are the timing and circumstances surrounding many adults' decisions to begin or resume college study.

Penn State's reputation, locations, curricula, and multiple delivery systems are a strong basis from which to return adult learners to the institution. In addition, the Commission's five sponsors head

divisions that have much to contribute to prospective and enrolled adult learners. Unfortunately, all of this currently is not enough to reverse a “crazy quilt” approach to institutional coordination and communication with adults. Several examples are provided of the ways in which messages and relationships make the University opaque to the prospective and currently enrolled adult.

This position paper concludes by identifying five strategic goals followed by a series of structural and procedural recommendations in support of the goals. To improve Penn State’s position vis-à-vis undergraduate adult learners, the Commission identifies the following strategic goals:

- Designate a senior-level institutional leader to be the primary champion-advocate for adult learners.
- Increase and coordinate a student-centered approach to the University’s recruitment efforts targeting adult learners.
- Increase undergraduate adult learner enrollment University wide.
- Increase undergraduate adult learner retention University wide.
- Encourage select University leaders to become leaders at the state and national levels on issues that are larger than Penn State yet impinge upon the institution.

In support of these strategic goals, five structural recommendations are offered:

- The Vice President for Outreach should become the primary champion-advocate for Penn State’s adult learners;
- The Vice President for Outreach should convene a task-focused team to develop a comprehensive marketing plan to reach potential adult learners;
- Strategic structural changes should be made to enhance efforts to enroll adults; they include
 - Increasing the level of communication and collaboration between the Enrollment Management and Administration and Outreach divisions,
 - Continuing and expanding the Center for Adult Learner Services’ comprehensive adult-focused efforts and aligning them with Outreach,
 - Undertaking efforts to identify policies and procedures that impede the University’s ability to attract and enroll adult learners, and
 - Institutionalizing the work of the Adult Data Partnership;
- Retention efforts should be enhanced by conducting an institutional self study, reviewing relevant policies and procedures, and continuing efforts to determine adult satisfaction, retention, and more;
- Small action-oriented, adult-focused teams should be formed at each campus to enhance both recruitment and retention.

The procedural recommendations focus on financial issues; admissions and enrollment issues; faculty development, curricula, and advising issues; and student services and student life issues which could improve many aspects of the prospective and enrolled adults’ relationships with the University.

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PENN STATE'S ADULT LEARNERS: MYTH VS. REALITY

Since its founding in 1998, the Commission for Adult Learners has sought to understand enrollment patterns, satisfaction, and application patterns of adult learners. Commission members visited three campus locations with high adult enrollment to identify best practices for attracting, recruiting, and retaining adult learners. Through these and other efforts, the Commission has developed a more complete picture of adult learners. We know who attends and seeks to attend Penn State, why they come, why they stay, why they don't come even when offered admission, and what will likely bring more of them to Penn State. We also have some insight into best practices that result in adult recruitment and retention. (See the Appendix for a list of surveys and other activity conducted by the Center for Adult Learner Services and the Data Collection and Institutional Infrastructure Committee of the Commission for Adult Learners.)

The Commission's five sponsors have encouraged a system-wide approach to adult learners. Through their questions, support, and insight we have sought to create the first system-wide, data-focused picture about Penn State's credit-seeking adult learners. Through our data collection efforts and our discussions with Commission members from across University Park and non-University Park locations and across many departments and campuses of the University, we have come to understand who adult learners are and how they differ from many of our stereotypes and have learned that they are as diverse as the population of Pennsylvania. They are as much like our traditional-age students as they are different from them. They are as different from the national picture as they are like it.

Myth #1: Adult learners dabble in higher education.

Reality: For fall 2003, 82% of all undergraduate adult learners sought degrees; only 18% were non-degree students.¹ For fall 2000, comparable figures showed that 76% of all adult undergraduates sought degrees, 24% were non-degree.² Of the degree undergraduate adults who enrolled for the first time in fall 1996, 48% graduated after four years, 53% in five, and 56% in six years.³ Interestingly, of the adult non-degree undergraduates who enrolled for the first time in fall 1996, 6% graduated in four years, 7% in five, and 8% in six years.⁴ For first-time undergraduate adult learners enrolling fall semesters, 1998 - 2002, 80% of them took only courses offered by Resident Instruction (RI), 17% took only courses offered by Continuing Education (CE), and 3% took an RI/CE mix.⁵

Myth #2: Adult learners only want to attend classes part time and in the evening.

Reality: For fall 2003, 55% of all undergraduate adult learners attended part time and 45% attended full time.⁶ For undergraduate adult students who were first-time enrollees for five fall semesters, 1998 - 2002, 59% of degree candidates were full-time students and 3% of non-degree undergraduate adults

¹ See Table 1

² See Table 2

³ See Table 3

⁴ See Table 4

⁵ See Table 5

⁶ See Table 6

enrolled full time.⁷ At University Park where CE is virtually synonymous with evening course offerings, 23% of first-time undergraduate adult enrollees took only courses offered by CE for fall semesters 1998 - 2002.⁸

Myth #3: Adult learners prefer to take World Campus courses rather than attend a physical campus location.

Reality: For fall semesters 2000 – 2003, 1.5% of all undergraduate students were grade-reported for courses offered by the World Campus while 6.8% of undergraduate adult learners were grade-reported for courses offered by the World Campus.⁹ It is noteworthy that for the 2003 admission cycle, 776 of 4431 undergraduate adult applicants, or 17.5%, requested the World Campus; the remaining 82.5% requested a physical campus location.¹⁰ For nine semesters, fall 2000 – summer 2003, 66% of all undergraduate World Campus students who received grades for that semester were non-degree, the remainder sought degrees.¹¹

Myth #4: Adult learners seek to enter Penn State as first-year students.

Reality: Penn State’s 2003 undergraduate adult applicants were more likely to be advanced standing (transfer) (i.e., they hold a high school diploma or equivalent and attempted 18 or more college credits) or provisional-with-credit applicants, than freshman (i.e., they hold a high school diploma or equivalent and may have attempted fewer than 18 college credits) or provisional (they hold a high school diploma or equivalent) applicants.¹² Forty percent were advanced standing applicants, 5% were provisional-with-credit applicants. In contrast, 27% were freshman applicants and 9% were provisional applicants. Looking at five fall semesters, 1999 – 2003, the average time that had elapsed since the adult transfer’s last post-secondary enrollment was seven years. This lengthy hiatus from higher education can make the average adult transfer’s needs for assistance and information different from those of the currently enrolled student who plans to transfer to another institution the following semester.¹³

Myth #5: Most adult learners are older women.

Reality: Aslanian (*Adult Students Today*, 2001) reports that the typical undergraduate adult learner is 38 years old, female, and white. In fall 2003, 50% of Penn State’s undergraduate adult enrollees were female. This average obscures the differences among locations; for example, 36% of adult learners at UP are female.¹⁴ For fall semesters 1998 - 2002, 43% of Penn State’s new enrollees were 29 years of age and younger and 31% were age 30 - 39.¹⁵ This means that some of Penn State’s current adult learners may be more like traditional-age students. (Interestingly, members of the Commission for Adult Learners report that some traditional-age students at their locations are more like adult learners—they hold full-time jobs and attend school part time.)

⁷ See Figure 1 and Table 7

⁸ See Table 8

⁹ See Table 9

¹⁰ See Figure 2 and Table 10

¹¹ See Table 11 and Figure 3

¹² See Figure 4 and Table 12

¹³ See Table 13

¹⁴ See Table 14

¹⁵ See Table 15

Myth #6: New adult learners will be served by programs targeting first-year students.

Reality: For fall semester 2003, 28% of new adult enrollees entered as transfers (i.e., they hold a high school diploma or equivalent and attempted 18 or more college credits) and 7% as provisional-with-credit students. Twenty-two per cent entered as freshmen (i.e., they hold a high school diploma or equivalent and may have attempted fewer than 18 college credits) and 12% entered with provisional (they hold a high school diploma or equivalent) status.¹⁶ Because large numbers of adult learners apply within two to four months of the semester in which they wish to enroll,¹⁷ those who are first-year students may receive offers of admission too late to participate in programs targeting first-year students (i.e., pre-enrollment testing, counseling and advising, orientation, and other new student programs). On the other hand, some adult learners who have participated in FTCAP, first-year seminars, and other new student programs have found content irrelevant given their age, personal circumstances, and motivation.¹⁸

Myth #7: Adult learners who seek higher education to “further themselves” have employers paying their tuition.

Reality: Newly enrolled adults who participated in the October 2003 Pulse survey were asked how they were financing their college education.¹⁹ Sixty-eight percent indicated that they used student loans, 44% used current income. Smaller percentages used scholarships (43%), personal savings (24%), and family assistance (12%). Only 11% used non Penn State employee benefits, 11% used veterans’ benefits, and 8% used Penn State employee benefits.

Myth #8: Adults are location bound.

Reality: It is true that nine Penn State locations (Altoona, Behrend, Berks, Fayette, McKeesport, Schuylkill, Shenango, Worthington Scranton, and York) had 66% or more of their adult applicants coming from one county for the 1998-2002 admissions cycles.²⁰ However, 41% of University Park’s adult applicants during the same period were from out-of-state, 32% were from other Pennsylvania counties, and 27% were from Centre County.²¹ During 2000 to 2002, seventy percent of World Campus applicants were from out-of-state.²² Different campuses served different adult constituencies.

Myth #9: Adult learners are usually students without strong learning skills; we need to bring them into the University as non-degree and provisional students so they will have an opportunity to improve their GPA and develop basic skills.

Reality: The University Registrar’s Office has provided the Center for Adult Learner Services with University-wide comparative grade point average data for several spring semesters. That information²³ appears below:

¹⁶ See Figure 5 and Table 16

¹⁷ See Figure 6, Table 17, Figure 7, and Table 18

¹⁸ See Pulse, October 2003 comments.

¹⁹ See <http://www.sa.psu.edu/sara/chronopulse.shtml>; select 114 – Adult Learners

²⁰ See Figures 8 - 16

²¹ See Figure 17

²² See Figure 18

²³ See Table 19

	Adult			Traditional-age		
	<u>2001</u>	<u>2002</u>	<u>2003</u>	<u>2001</u>	<u>2002</u>	<u>2003</u>
Non-degree	3.16	3.12	3.14	2.15	2.15	2.17
Provisional	2.76	2.76	2.83	2.28	2.27	2.27
Degree	3.10	3.08	3.10	2.96	2.98	2.99

In a study appearing in the Winter 1997 issue of the *Adult Education Quarterly*,²⁴ Darkenwald and Novak reported that the greater the proportion of adults in a college classroom the higher the aggregate average performance of the class as measured by class grades.

Myth #10: Adult learners will enroll at a Penn State campus because of the breadth of offerings and Penn State’s reputation.

Reality: When asked what influenced their decision to enroll at Penn State, new adult enrollees at all Penn State locations who participated in the October 2003 Pulse survey²⁵ gave these top three responses:

1. 78.8% said majors or programs offered
2. 76.5% said location
3. 73.1% said Penn State reputation.

However, we see a pattern developing among those who were offered Penn State admission but did not enroll.²⁶ Of these, 29% of the adults, enrolled elsewhere. When asked why, 39.7% said the other institution was more affordable, 32.9% said they liked the program of study better, and 26.0% said they liked the location better, despite the fact their decision to apply to Penn State was based on Penn State reputation (80.3%), location (72.0%) and majors offered (69.1%).

Although programs, location, and reputation are important, increasingly, and for many adults, the affordability of a Penn State degree is becoming a factor in their decision to attend, despite its variety of programs and majors, locations, and reputation.

Discussion: As we seek to understand Pennsylvania and Penn State’s adult learners, we must continue to be sure we understand who our potential adult learners are and why they come to Penn State. Today’s adult learner has many more options for higher education than at any other time. They have many reasons for selecting one university over another or one campus location over another.

In reality, Penn State’s adult learners cannot be characterized by any single broad-brush stroke. They may differ significantly from the national picture (See Myth #5); they may even differ from one campus location to another (See Myth #8). Adult learners at Penn State campuses can be found in significant numbers in both daytime and evening resident instruction courses; they can be found taking courses through Continuing Education at their work site, at an off campus center, or at University Park in the evening; and they are at home taking World Campus courses. Based on the heterogeneity of adult learners, we should not assume that the University’s Outreach arm bears sole responsibility to recruit and

²⁴ G. G. Darkenwald and R. J. Novak, “Classroom Age Composition and Academic Achievement in College,” *Adult Education Quarterly*, v. 47, no. 2 (Winter 1997): 108 – 116.

²⁵ See <http://www.sa.psu.edu/sara/chronopulse.shtml>; select 114 – Adult Learners

²⁶ See <http://www.sa.psu.edu/cals/data.shtml>; select Spring 2003 Adult Applicant Study

serve the institution's adult learners or that it can provide the variety of offerings adult learners indicate they want. However, Outreach can once again be an important avenue for some adult learners to gain a higher education if its programs are clearly defined and its relationship to resident instruction, Enrollment Management, and other entities are strengthened and coordinated.

Finally, adult learners are budget and cost conscious. They want value for their money and are service-oriented. Many, but not all, are location-bound requiring training and education to make a change in their lives or to pursue something they have always wanted—a college degree (See Myth #1). The respondents to our survey of adult learners who applied, were offered admission, and did not enroll tell us that they chose other colleges and universities over Penn State because of Penn State's high tuition, limited program offerings, less accessible class schedules, unresponsiveness regarding transfer of their credits, and less personalized attention from Penn State faculty and staff. The good news is that those who do elect to come to Penn State, regardless of location, are generally satisfied with their experience.²⁷

PENN STATE'S ADULT LEARNER DRAIN

“At all of Penn State's campuses, we will need to pay increased attention to adult learners.”

Graham Spanier, *The Challenges of Pennsylvania Demography for Higher Education*

Across the United States, adult learners represent approximately 40% of all post-secondary students. Growth of adults age 25 and older is expected to continue - from 6 million credit-seeking post-secondary students in 2000 to 6.7 million in 2012 (U.S. Department of Education, *Projections of Education Statistics to 2012*). The Pennsylvania picture is not so rosy.²⁸ In Pennsylvania the total number of adult post-secondary learners decreased from 199,360 in 1993 to 191,708 in 2003, the last year for which data are available. This represents a 4% decrease in the total number of adult postsecondary learners in Pennsylvania. Meanwhile, the number of undergraduate adult learners in Pennsylvania decreased 15% between 1993 and 2003 in contrast to Penn State's 24% decrease in adult undergraduate learners (Pennsylvania Department of Education Division of Data Services' *Fall Enrollments in Pennsylvania Institutions of Higher Education*). The credit participation rate for 25 to 34-year olds also is noteworthy. Across the United States, 15.5% of 25 to 34-year olds take college courses for credit (U.S. Department of Education, *The Condition of Education 2003*). In Pennsylvania, the credit participation rate for 25 to 34-year olds is 8.85% (Census 2000, Summary File3 Education Profile 1: Detailed Attainment & Enrollment).

For Penn State, the total number of adult learners age 24 and older declined from 1995 through 2001, increased slightly in 2002, and declined in fall 2003.²⁹ Adult learners now represent 23% of all Penn State students in comparison to 29% in 1994. A few Penn State locations experienced growth in their adult learner population between 1994 and 2003—Altoona, Fayette, Great Valley, Wilkes-Barre, Worthington Scranton, and York. All other campus college locations and University Park experienced significant declines. (Center for Adult Learner Services' *Adult Learner Fall Total Enrollment*). In 2003, 8% of Pennsylvania's total adult student population was enrolled at Penn State, while 11% were enrolled

²⁷ See <http://www.sa.psu.edu/sara/chronopulse.shtml>; select 114 – Adult Learners and 65 – Adult Student Learners and the adult learner specific analyses of the Student Satisfaction Surveys <http://www.sa.psu.edu/sara/satisfaction.shtml>

²⁸ See Table 20

²⁹ See Table 21 and Table 22

at State System of Higher Education (SSHE) universities (Pennsylvania Department of Education Division of Data Services' *Fall Enrollments in Pennsylvania Institutions of Higher Education*, Center for Adult Learner Services' enrollment reports).

The decline in Penn State undergraduate adult enrollment can be attributed to the overall decline in adult enrollment at Penn State between 1994 and 2003.³⁰ In 1994, undergraduate adult enrollees age 24 and over represented 10,871 or 19% of all undergraduate students; in 2003, the numbers fell to 8,281 and the percentage decreased to 13%. This 24% decrease in Penn State undergraduate adult enrollment occurred during a period of enrollment growth from 57,876 in 1994 to 64,882 in 2003. (Center for Adult Learner Services' *Adult Learner Fall Undergraduate Enrollment*).

Recently, with more and more urgency, Penn State has articulated its commitment to the adult learner market for the campus college locations. In addition, the figures cited above suggest that the college-going rate for adult Pennsylvanians could be increased to meet national norms if interventions were made by both state government and higher education. However, we fear that a recruitment focus on traditional-age and out-of-state students has becoming the unspoken standard for many campus college locations, where a strong mix of adult learners and traditional-age students is more realistic and more likely to return economic viability to campus college locations and bring additional diversity to University Park.

We must not lose sight of the fact that Penn State's campuses are integral to the economic health of the communities in which they are located.³¹ Yet, declining numbers of high school graduates and an over-reliance on their enrollments may affect the fiscal viability of many of our campuses and their historical role in serving the needs of their communities. In addition, as adult learner numbers fall, those who remain can become more isolated (See Myth #9).

The cost to attend Penn State is increasingly becoming a negative influence in many adult learners' decision to attend Penn State (See Myth #10). The May 2003 survey of adult learners who received offers of admission to Penn State but who did not enroll³² found that the opportunity for more financial aid was a factor among those adults who applied to colleges other than Penn State. And those who were accepted by Penn State but chose to go elsewhere chose other institutions in large part because they were unable to manage Penn State's tuition costs.

The adult who seeks to begin or resume college study is guided greatly by program cost, program availability, and time to completion; and time often equates to money. The following are the tuition and fees costs of enrolling in a three-credit course at Penn State and four other colleges and universities:

³⁰ See Table 23 and Table 24

³¹ "We recommend that Pennsylvania invest heavily in education and training, promote development in key select industries, and focus on industries that promote the revitalization of older communities" – Brookings Institute, *Back to Prosperity: A Competitive Agenda for Renewing Pennsylvania* (December 2003) and *Road to 2004: Update on Pennsylvania, The Economic, Jobs, Forecasts, and Telecommunications* (College of Agricultural Sciences, Department of Agricultural Economics and Rural Sociology, Dec. 2003).

³² See <http://www.sa.psu.edu/cals/data.shtml>; select Spring 2003 Adult Applicant Study

2003-2004 Tuition and Fees Cost Comparison
A three-credit course, in-state rate

School	Tuition and Fee Range
Penn State – University Park	\$1,229.00
Penn State--Worthington-Scranton	\$1,113.00
Thiel College	\$1,173
Mansfield State University	\$709.25
Harrisburg Area Community College	\$255.00 - \$480.00
Community College of Allegheny County	\$243.60 - \$467.85

Information from school Web sites 6/29/04. Range includes rates for in-county resident to any Pennsylvania resident attending that school.

In addition to these tuition and fees differentials, many adult applicants have found that financial aid application deadlines and processes disadvantage applicants who arrive later in the application cycle; and many have learned that their non-degree status meant they were not eligible for financial aid.

Complicating this picture is awareness by many Pennsylvania educational institutions that adult learners are integral to their own growth and prosperity. For this reason, Penn State is faced with increasing competition in the adult learner market from SSHE universities, community colleges, e-delivery systems such as the University of Phoenix, private universities, and for-profit educational providers. To address these trends, Penn State must critically assess its position in the adult learner market, what it has to offer adult learners, and what role it can play in Pennsylvania’s economic recovery in the coming years. It must undergo a serious self-evaluation to understand what it needs to do to change the continuing downward trend in the number of adult learners.

At present, Penn State offers these delivery options to adult students—Continuing Education, World Campus, and Resident Instruction—and each delivery arm attempts in varying degrees to recruit and retain adults. In addition to the efforts by delivery options to recruit adults, campus locations recruit adults too. This creates a complicated picture for adults who, rather than being recruited as individuals with educational goals, are being recruited by campuses **and** delivery options. As a result, adult survey respondents and those visiting our offices ask: what is the best option for a specific course or degree? What about financial aid for World Campus courses? Do you get a CE or World Campus degree? Are all these courses equally applicable to a Penn State degree? Would we better represent Penn State if we were to 1) recruit and attract adult learners to Penn State University and direct them toward the delivery option that will best meet their needs and 2) better coordinate these different delivery options to communicate that adults may use these different approaches to their own advantage or at different stages of their lifelong learning?

As members of the Commission look system-wide, we wonder, following decisions to reduce CE’s involvement in credit offerings and to reorganize the campus colleges, whether the role of CE and World Campus was clearly articulated and if the time is now to begin to coordinate efforts more carefully. Our data show that the decline in adult learner enrollment began in 1994 as the campus colleges increasingly offered greater numbers of RI courses during evening hours and adult students seeking degrees turned to

these courses (See Myth #1). CE now plays a very different role from one campus location to another; and at each location, CE is strikingly different from the role it plays at University Park (*Penn State Task Force on Continuing Education Final Report*, July 2004). In many cases, the message that CE courses are the starting place for adult learners because they work, adults are not interested in degrees (See Myth #1), or adults need to enter the University with provisional or non-degree status to improve their GPA and basic skills (See Myth #9) is not accurate. We ask Penn State to consider what role CE will play in attracting adult learners.

Our data indicate that almost 60% of first-time degree adult learners are full-time students and most took RI courses (See Myth #2); but they will mix-and-match delivery options (“blended learning”) as it meets their needs (See Myth #3). However, the low numbers of students who mix courses offered by RI, CE, and/or the World Campus may be symptomatic of a larger problem. Data also show that adult learners are not always location bound (See Myth #7) and new enrollees who are transfer students outnumber those who enter as freshmen (See Myth #6). To what extent are we meeting the needs of this larger cohort—transfer students—and positioning ourselves in each of our delivery options to meet their needs (See Myth #4)?

Members of the Commission wonder what program offerings are most appropriate for the CE, World Campus, and RI delivery options and work to have these offerings fit hand in glove to feed and support one another. This would give more adult learners more options, clarify the role of each delivery “arm” of the University, and allow us greater efficiencies in marketing, in recruiting and enrollment management, and in coordinating program offerings and curricula across more locations, particularly programs that are desirable at many locations.

We also must devote our attention to how adult students enter the University and how we can create a “tradition of serving the needs of adult learners” at Penn State based on the CAEL (Council for Adult and Experiential Learning) *Principles of Effectiveness for Serving Adult Learners in Higher Education*. The role of the Center for Adult Learner Services at University Park provides a model for how to combine roles for a visible avenue into the University from application inquiry to creating a campus climate and place that is adult responsive. However, the role of the Center for Adult Learner Services could be expanded University-wide to provide training and advice to campus locations on how to implement the CAEL *Principles* while also providing insight and data analysis to better understand trends and patterns related to adult learners.

We believe there are many reasons to focus on attracting adult learners through our program offerings and delivery options. As we look system-wide and evaluate our adult enrollment and applicant data, only a few Penn State locations (Shenango, Fayette, and York) report large adult learner enrollments. However, would we capture more adult learners if we coordinated the offering of many locations, many delivery options, and a variety of programs that adults who are first-time students, adults who are transfer students, adults who are location bound, and adults who need more flexible hours for course learning can blend into their own combinations? How much would Penn State gain if it were to coordinate its message, coordinate its delivery options, and coordinate its services to attract adult learners into Penn State?

IT'S NOT EASY TO BECOME A PENN STATE STUDENT

“I am a ‘mature’ student working full-time in the publishing industry. How would a Penn State World Campus degree differ from a Penn State Abington degree? Is the online degree considered 100% authentic, or is it viewed negatively and perhaps not as a ‘real’ degree?”—Margo, a prospective student

Adults turn to higher education for career-related reasons such as job loss and unemployment, to prepare for a better job or promotion, to learn a particular job skill, and more. A change in family circumstances such as separation, divorce, or death of a spouse; the last child’s going to school or college; or a family move can be the impetus for adult learning. Other triggers include health reasons such as an on-the-job injury, personal health problems, or a family member’s illness; the desire to complete a degree once abandoned; greater self-confidence about their ability to succeed than they possessed earlier in life; and the joy of learning. Some of these triggers themselves are incredibly stressful and result in economic difficulties. Returning to learning after an absence of years, sometimes decades and being unfamiliar with how higher education works add further stressors. The adult who chooses to investigate Penn State is then faced with an institution that is large, complex, and difficult to understand. It’s not easy to become a Penn State student.

Most adults ask, where and how do I begin? They turn to Web sites, staff members, phone calls, and program attendance for answers to these questions. But a torrent of other questions immediately follows:

- Can I afford to go to school?
- What scholarships or loans can I get to pay for this?
- Can I still work and earn a degree in business, engineering, or education?
- Can I still learn? Can I compete with the kids?
- What application process do I use?
- Which of my previous college credits will transfer?
- Can I get credit for military training, on-the-job training, CLEP, and life experience?
- How will these credits meet requirements for the degree(s) that I seek?
- I want an x, y, or z degree. How do I get in?
- Can I just sign up for a course?
- What’s the difference between day and CE courses?
- How do I schedule classes?
- Do you offer the courses I want? Where and when?

The high school senior has access to a guidance counselor, college-bound friends, often higher education-savvy relatives, and more. The typical adult applicant frequently is distanced from similar advice givers, is a higher education neophyte, or has been away from higher education for several years. When prospective adult learners turn to Web sites, resource materials, and staff members for answers to these and other questions, what do they find? Do they find information about courses and degrees offered by delivery arms? Do they find information about their options and names of people to help them consider those options? Are they transferred many times? For all these reasons, some adult learners slip into Penn State, others slip out or never manage to navigate successfully our admissions system. Such unresponsiveness to an entire potential group of students is contrary to the welcome we provide traditional-age students, minorities, athletes, and international students whom we efficiently encourage to

apply to Penn State locations, then greet and welcome as they enter—seeking to create a positive start and orientation for parent and student alike.

Penn State must position itself to provide prospective adult students with clear, accurate, and concise information; offer the programs, majors, and certificates that will attract and serve them; and offer them where and when they need it. This will require us to pay closer attention to how we offer these services and how we communicate to adult students addressing barriers that adult learners encounter.

The members of the Commission for Adults Learners believe Penn State must begin to act now to change declining enrollments of adult learners. The need to act is made even more urgent by the anticipated decline in the number of high school graduates in certain areas of the state; i.e., the source of the University’s traditional-age students.

RETURNING ADULT LEARNERS TO PENN STATE

“My family has all attended Penn Sate University so there was a lot of pressure for me to pursue my degree there as well.”

“I come from a Penn State family; I wanted to follow in everyone’s footsteps.”

Respondents to October 2003 *Pulse survey*.

Now is the time for Penn State to develop and commit itself to a three- to five- year plan that will reverse its adult learner drain and to better understand Pennsylvania’s adult learner population as it seeks higher education. Penn State has an opportunity to create a success story that results in growing numbers of adult learners across all campus locations. Furthermore, Penn State’s success has the potential to fuel economic development and stability within many Pennsylvania communities³³ while ensuring Penn State’s continuing role of excellence in higher education. Penn State has many foundations for success:

1. **Reputation:** Penn State University is uniquely positioned in the Commonwealth as the flagship institution for higher education, its land-grant university, and the major public university.
2. **Location:** Penn State has a statewide presence with campuses at 24 different locations, most of which accept undergraduates.
3. **Curricula:** Across its many locations, Penn State offers over 160 baccalaureate degrees, over 25 associate degrees, and numerous credit certificates. Included are majors in health care, education, business, and computer technology/engineering—all programs of high interest to adult learners (C. B. Aslanian, *Adult Students Today*, 2001, New York: The College Board) and fields in which employment opportunities exist.

³³ “The beauty of Penn State’s reach is its ability to help the 22 local workforce investment areas, some of which cover multiple counties. In addition, there are 10 regional economic development areas. All of Penn State’s campuses, as well as its Extension services, should be involved with the strategy developed at the regional level. This is where the action is. This is where Penn State can bring resources to the table.” Deborah H. Benedetti, “Tackling Labor Issues in Pennsylvania: Outreach Asks Fred Dedrick of the Workforce Investment Board How Penn State Can Help,” *Penn State Outreach*, v. 7, no. 1 (Spring 2004): 15.

4. **Multiple-delivery options:** In addition to locations offering daytime and evening Resident Instruction courses, some Continuing Education units at the campus colleges offer credit courses at centers, malls, and work sites. In addition to offering credit courses at centers and work sites, CE at University Park offers credit courses on campus. World Campus reaches students through its online paced courses and its more traditional self-paced courses.

In addition to the above institutional assets, the Commission has reflected on the assets of its sponsors: their divisions' unique contributions to prospective and enrolled adult learners. Rather than be comprehensive, the paragraphs that follow are focused:

Outreach has a rich tradition of serving adult students on campus, in centers and the workplace, and at a distance. Outreach units have expertise marketing to adults and understanding their needs. CE at University Park and the World Campus offer courses (both credit and noncredit) and degrees that meet the educational needs of specific adult learner constituencies. Many Outreach staff are connected with their communities, know where potential adult learners exist, and are skilled at reaching them. Outreach leadership is visible and connected on workforce development matters. However, CE means different things to many people which confuses both internal and external audiences; and CE has had limited involvement for over a decade with credit offerings and fitting adults into the RI part of the institution.

Enrollment Management and Administration units are the institutional entry points for credit students. Undergraduate Admissions is the entry point for all undergraduate degree-seeking students regardless of delivery system. Undergraduate Admissions staff knows the traditional-age student and school districts well; it has in place an effective communication and applicant review infrastructure. The Registrar's Office is the focal point for former students seeking re-enrollment and non-degree students, categories in which adults are disproportionately represented. Student Aid staff process aid awards for University students. However, processing aid to those taking World Campus courses and gaining aid for non-degree certificate students challenge existing systems, requiring manual intervention.

Commonwealth College campuses are embedded in their communities and are often the first, and perhaps only, point of contact for adult applicants in their service area. Advisory board members are selected from the business and economic leadership of the communities which the campuses serve. At some campuses, staff has worked with Workforce Investment Boards in order to assist dislocated workers seeking higher education and with donors to establish funds that address some unique financial aid needs of their adults. Five of the twelve Commonwealth College locations have adult enrollments that exceed 30% and expertise at attracting and serving adult applicants/enrollees. It is possible to build on that expertise to train staff and faculty at the campuses acutely in need of increased adult enrollments.

Undergraduate Education is responsible for formulating academic administrative policies and procedures that guide the admission and enrollment of undergraduate students, communicating information needed by new enrollees, operating learning support centers, coordinating undergraduate advising, providing faculty development training programs, overseeing the University's fellowship programs, and more. Adult learners need admissions and enrollment policies that are responsive to their circumstances whether it be their not taking a foreign language in high school fifteen years ago, seeking to earn credit through means other than transfer credit, or re-enrolling students uniformly across the University. Informed and responsive advising, tutoring, and learning assistance are essential.

Student Affairs sees its mission as building a sense of community for students, enhancing students' experiences inside and outside the classroom, and developing future leaders. Toward those ends the Center for Adult Learner Services has assisted the adult who seeks to begin or resume college study, helped the adult who adds the role of student to their other life roles, and advocated for and with the adult learner. Career Services staff has collaborated on programs which have benefited both prospective and enrolled adult students. Residence Life has responded with more living options including those for undergraduate adults with families; and the Center for Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) has long conducted group sessions for the returning adult student and delivered programs to meet their needs.

Commission members have asked and been asked the question, Who is responsible for adult learners? We all are! But what we all are doing is clearly not enough. It is crucial that Penn State finds ways to make it easier for adult learners to use our entire system and our several delivery options to their benefit. We must focus on adult learners to show them how they can reach their goals through Penn State's many delivery options--effectively "branding" *Penn State for Adult Learners: No Matter Where You Are*.

This approach allows the University not only to build upon what already exists, but also encourages us to create a new paradigm that puts adult learners' needs at the center of decision-making, rather than the delivery models and the existing organizational structure. We need to make important changes in how we communicate and coordinate our efforts.

A CRAZY QUILT APPROACH TO COMMUNICATION AND COORDINATION

"Once you get us you just forget us."

"I think a more organized exchange of communication between myself and the school would have made it less frustrating."

Respondents to the October 2003 Pulse survey

While many staff and offices across the University are committed to supporting adult learners, our three-campus focus groups revealed that hands-on, day-to-day interaction is crucial to enroll adult learners. At University Park, for example, the Center for Adult Learner Services provides adult learners with information and advice about the application process, financial aid availability, course and program offerings (not just at University Park, but often across the system), and special programming to attract and retain adult learners. This model is played out in varying degrees across all Penn State locations. However, these offices and services are pieced together in such a crazy quilt, and often budget-driven, manner that it is difficult for potential Penn State adult students to understand where and how they can enter Penn State. For example, prospective students ask how the Center for Adult Learner Services differs from the Continuing Education at University Park (CE at UP) office. Less higher education savvy adults have believed that they had to be "in CE" and be night students. Others believed that the only degrees available to adults were those offered by CE. Because the CE at UP budget generates funds for newspaper ads and supplements, radio ads, a mall kiosk, and television commercials, it is easy to see how students become confused and form erroneous beliefs.

Crazy quilt examples do not end here, however. The reader of CE at UP's *Summer 2004 Course Handbook* learns that it is possible locally to earn associate degrees such as IST, Human Development and Family Studies, and Business and the bachelor's degree in Organizational Leadership. Yet an adult looking at the paper *2004 Undergraduate Application* sees no associate degrees offered at University Park. And looking under the application's baccalaureate major chart, one sees that Organizational Leadership is available only through the World Campus. The World Campus Web site (http://www.worldcampus.psu.edu/pub/afs/app_instructions.html) contains these instructions for completing an Undergraduate Admissions application: "On the Choosing Major section, if applying for a Bachelor's Degree in Letters, Arts, and Sciences or the Bachelor's Degree in Organizational Leadership, select Interdisciplinary Studies as the first general area choice. You will then be able to select your major and World Campus at the campus location." And yes, those who are offered admission and want to take courses offered at University Park can later request a change of campus location. Given this convoluted situation and those that follow, it is no surprise that adults get frustrated, confused, and turn elsewhere.

A full-time staff member who is also a returning adult student attending CE classes wrote a letter to the dean of the Smeal College in mid-April; portions are excerpted here: "As you are aware the Associate Degree program has moved from the Smeal College of Business to the Altoona campus within the past year. Since I will be graduating this semester, I was informed at the end of February that if I would like to attend a graduation ceremony, I have to attend the ceremony on the Altoona campus (May 8). . . . As a student of Penn State University's main campus, I was disappointed to learn that my diploma not only shows I graduated from a campus I have never stepped foot on, but would be mailed to me instead of receiving it 'in hand' at the ceremony. Over the past three and one-half years, I have worked extremely hard to achieve my educational goals. In order to graduate in the spring of 2004, I increased my course load beyond what Penn State allows for the staff discount, paying the remainder out of pocket, just so I could walk across the stage in the Bryce Jordan Center." Her appeal to participate in Smeal's graduation ceremony was denied.

Students using the Registrar's Web site to learn the times during which all English 15 courses are offered must know enough to check both the University Park campus location and the State College Campus CE location or read both the paper Schedule of Classes and the CE Handbook. Abington College plans to offer the Organizational Leadership major through Continuing Education and has obtained the names of persons who earned Penn State associate degrees or credits. CE will send out a promotional flyer on this new major. Will flyer recipients learn that they may pursue any Abington degree including this degree completion major or learn only about Organizational Leadership? Contrast this with the University of New Mexico's approach to bringing dropouts back to college: <http://www.highereducation.org/crosstalk/ct0204/news0204-dropouts.shtml>. Dropouts are contacted via letter, informed of their options, file a shortened re-admit application with no fee, receive a degree summary stating which courses are needed for graduation, receive priority enrollment in classes and personal assistance when problems arise, and are eligible for a special Tuition Assistance Program.

Penn State has an expedient process for a former student who wishes to re-enroll. The Center for Adult Learner Services recently contacted a new adult re-enrollee and suggested that he might want to be aware of academic renewal because of his previous less than a 1.0 GPA. Although the re-enrollment application asks if the individual wants to be considered for re-enrollment with academic renewal, this student must not have known what it was. Had he waited for four more months to return, he would have

benefited from academic renewal and his spring 2004 GPA of a 4.0 would be his new GPA. Alas, he is appealing his situation.

The number of courses offered by CE in the evening and on weekends has declined from 970 in fall 1988 to 561 in fall 1993 and remained stable ever since, while the number of courses offered in the evening and on weekends by RI has increased from 548 in fall 1988 to 1,201 in fall 1993 and exceeded 2,000 in fall 2003.³⁴ At University Park, CE at UP's visible marketing campaigns may cause some adults to infer that they should begin through this delivery arm of the University; however, adult students soon discover that they may be better able to complete many majors/degrees by taking courses offered by RI. Also, this marketing approach may not address the needs of adult transfer students whose need for upper division courses may be better served by taking courses offered by RI.

The Outreach Office of Marketing Communications does an excellent job of preparing recruitment materials for CE at UP and for statewide program offerings such as the Organizational Leadership bachelor's degree, but this expertise does not work in coordination with Undergraduate Admissions staff who have developed an adult-focused undergraduate marketing piece to be used University-wide or with Center for Adult Learner Services staff who developed a University-wide recruitment piece focused on prospective minority adults.

Adult learners are independent and goal oriented; and we should be able to create a framework that allows them to answer their own questions. Communicating effectively and coordinating our communication for consistent clear messages is an important element that must be developed if adult learners are to understand the benefits of Penn State's statewide, multi-delivery system. Our adult applicant data³⁵ indicate that one consistent factor in why adult learners chose not to come to Penn State was because we failed to communicate to them:

- that we wanted them as students,
- that we had the required infrastructure (programs, the ability to transfer credits, and access to financial aid) to meet their needs,
- that our system fits together to make Penn State the best place for an adult learner to be.

For example, 70% of survey respondents who applied to Penn State, were accepted, but chose not to enroll and 43% of October 2003 Pulse survey respondents indicated that they relied on Penn State WWW sites as a source of information when they were considering whether to attend Penn State. Interaction with staff (46% of adult applicants and 42% of newly enrolled adults) follows the WWW as an important source of information. Yet, written comments from adult learners who applied and were accepted but chose not to come to Penn State indicate there are a significant number of miscues during this crucial period when adult applicants sought additional help and information. This point was also made by our speaker, Pamela Tate, at the 2004 Hendrick Best Practices for Adult Learners Conference who described her own efforts to understand Penn State's "complicated" campus system and course offerings by using our Web pages for insight and information. Because we have not provided clear and consistent messages to adult learners about where to begin their entry into Penn State via our WWW pages and because the avenues of access and help differ from location to location, many adult learners are slipping through the cracks to other universities and colleges.

³⁴ See Table 25

³⁵ See <http://www.sa.psu.edu/cals/data.shtml>; select Spring 2003 Adult Applicant Study

Further, we do not manage enrollment of adult learners in the same way we manage enrollment of traditional-age students. Would benefits accrue to both the University and its former students, if we were to court dropouts like the University of New Mexico has? Are we sending adult transfers and re-enrollees, many of whom have been out of school for years, more detailed information to help them return? Are we committed to providing college-based advising before they apply? If we are to be successful, the first step is to manage the enrollment of adult learners as carefully as we do traditional-age students. How we attract and provide adult learners with application information is very important.

Lastly, and very importantly, we find that research universities crunch numbers on matters important to them: minority students, females, international students, and student athletes and the graduation and retention rates of select student populations. Why, until the last year and a half, have virtually no resources been dedicated to gaining an on-going understanding of Penn State's adult applicants and enrollees? Because no one has been tasked with understanding the adult learner market, the adult applicant, the adult enrollee, and their experiences and retention while they attend Penn State, it has been difficult for those seeking to improve adult recruitment and retention to do so. During 2003-04, the Commission joined with the Center to conduct two surveys and with Outreach, Enrollment Management, and Student Affairs via the Center to form an Adult Data Partnership initiative, which has generated the data cited in this paper. If adult learners truly are important to Penn State, an investment must be made to analyze existing data, conduct further studies, and disseminate findings about them.

In order to communicate, coordinate, and manage our recruitment efforts more effectively, Penn State should implement a different organizational model – one that is adult-student centered, rather than one driven by administrative structure or delivery systems. We believe that a large investment of new resources is not needed to implement this model. Most of what will be required is a reallocation and change in focus of existing resources. What also is missing is a champion or advocate for adult learners. For example, adult learners appear not to have a voice, support, or champion in the Faculty Senate. We note the absence of consistent University-wide recognition of the need to increase adult learner recruitment, enrollment, and retention in the face of declining University-wide enrollments.

We must begin by increasing adult learner recruitment and enrollments and acknowledging that efforts also must be directed toward their retention. By managing adult learner enrollments, we can build upon existing structures, including adult centers at a few campuses and the Center for Adult Learner Services at University Park, and upon the adult education/learner expertise of colleagues. By doing so, we can do away with duplication of effort and collect data and information centrally that can be analyzed and disseminated more quickly. Penn State will need to:

1. Articulate that adult learners are vital to the institution.
2. Develop a strong centralized effort to recruit, attract, and manage adult learner enrollments, as well as to provide learning support and student services once adult students are enrolled.
3. Recognize that adult learners have many different needs and respond in ways that are both cost effective for the University and more effective for adult learners.
4. Capitalize on Penn State's strengths and coordinate and communicate more effectively across our different delivery options.
5. Enable adult learners with different characteristics to be served by Penn State differently, to create services and programs that meet their needs and create easily accessible and common pathways for adult learners to move from one level/stage to another.

STRATEGIC GOALS

Penn State has reached a cross roads vis-à-vis adult learners. We can continue doing what we've always done which has been reflected in a downward drift in adult enrollments. Or we can articulate new goals and take informed actions which may result in an improved future. The Commission for Adult Learners proposes the following strategic goals:

Goal: Designate a senior-level institutional leader to be the primary champion-advocate for adult learners. This individual will champion, advocate, and provide institutional leadership for adult learners regardless of their prospective student status, their full- or part-time enrollment status, the delivery system through which they learn, the location at which they study, and the time of day they study. This assignment of leadership responsibility for the adult learner is similar to the responsibility currently borne by Dr. Janis Jacobs for international students; Dr. Terrell Jones for students of color, students with disabilities, and veterans; and Dr. Vicky Triponey in her position as vice president for Student Affairs.

Goal: Increase and coordinate a student-centered approach to the University's recruitment efforts targeting adult learners. To achieve this goal, the focus of recruitment efforts must move from equating adults with delivery systems and specific campus locations to creating an institutional image as one inviting and welcoming to adult learners. The institutional champion/advocate for adult learners must provide leadership for this effort by convening appropriate parties and coordinating efforts to fashion University-wide adult-focused recruitment messages, Web sites, advertising, and literature.

Goal: Increase undergraduate adult learner enrollment University wide. Enrollment goals should be established for the full-time adult, the working/part-time adult, the re-enrolling adult, and the adult learning at a distance. The senior-level institutional champion/advocate for adult learners must collaborate with those in the University responsible for enrollment/registration functions to set and meet the enrollment goals; establish adult-learner responsive entry points; implement admissions/registration policies and procedures that are conducive to adult recruitment, enrollment, re-enrollment, and non-degree registration; collect and disseminate data and information that support these efforts; provide staff training; and more.

Goal: Increase undergraduate adult learner retention University wide. The senior-level institutional champion/advocate for adult learners must collaborate with others University wide to insure more adult-responsive academic policies and procedures, curriculum, instruction, advising, and other student services. A commitment must be made to tracking the retention and graduation rates of adult learners, assessing adult student use of and satisfaction with institutional resources, and learning more from adult learner alumni.

Goal: Encourage select University leaders to become leaders at the state and national levels on issues that are larger than Penn State yet impinge upon the institution. Examples include workforce development, financial aid for the working adult, and increasing the participation rate of Pennsylvania adults in higher education.

The following recommendations identify both structural and procedural changes that Commission members feel are needed in order to return Penn State's relationship with adult

learners to its rightful place. The degree to which the structural recommendations can be implemented successfully will set the stage for further collaborations and progress on procedural recommendations.

STRUCTURAL RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1: In concert with recommendation 14 of the Task Force on Continuing Education Final Report, July 2004, we recommend that the Vice President for Outreach become the senior-level institutional leader who is the primary champion-advocate for Penn State’s adult learners. In making this recommendation, we re-emphasize strongly the need for a champion-advocate who provides institutional leadership for adult learners regardless of their prospective student status, their full- or part-time enrollment status, the delivery system through which they learn, the location at which they study, and the time of day they study. Indeed, the role of institutional champion-advocate can be fulfilled and must be assumed by a person or persons whose adult-student-centered vision exceeds their administrative responsibilities.

Recommendation 2: The Vice President for Outreach should convene a task-focused team comprised of marketing persons from his organization and other organizations, such as University Marketing and Advertising, Communications and Visitation in Undergraduate Admissions, and the marketing and recruitment operations from the campus colleges, to develop a comprehensive marketing plan that features centralized and decentralized efforts to reach prospective adult learners. Components of the plan would include central and campus-specific Web references to adult learners, print/e-mail/other media-based efforts to reach adults, and more. In addition to conceptualizing this plan, the team should be charged with identifying those who would assume responsibility for carrying out the plan’s components and attaching costs to the major components of the plan. This team should be given a four-month timeline maximum for its work.

Recommendation 3: In their 1989 book *Improving Higher Education Environments for Adults*,³⁶ Schlossberg, Lynch, and Chickering’s “most important recommendation is for institutions to establish an entry education center that coordinates the full range of services and programs so that students can build a solid relationship with our institutions” (p. 65). The authors wrote, “The entry education center would house recruitment, preadmission counseling, admissions, orientation, financial aid and planning, student employment, educational planning, academic advising, developmental assessment, assessment of prior learning, and registration staff” (p. 66). More recently (2002) Kasworm, Polson, and Fishback in *Responding to Adult Learners in Higher Education*³⁷ referenced Schlossberg, et al’s work and wrote of the need for institutions to have One-Stop Informational Centers or, in its more comprehensive form, an Adult Student Center (p. 122). Again the focus was on a location and set of services such as those currently provided by the Center for Adult Learner Services, which aids prospective students considering enrollment at any undergraduate Penn State location, transitions students at UP into enrollment, recognizes adult achievement, and more. We recommend that the Center for Adult Learner Services’ one-stop/comprehensive adult-focused efforts are continued, expanded, and aligned with the organization of

³⁶ Schlossberg, N. K., Lynch, A. Q., and Chickering, A. W. (1989). *Improving Higher Education Environments for Adults*. Jossey-Bass Publishers: San Francisco.

³⁷ Kasworm, C. E., Polson, D. J., Fisback, S. J. (2002). *Responding to Adult Learners in Higher Education*. Krieger Publishing Company: Malabar, Fla.

the University's champion-advocate for adult learners. Ensure that this unit has sufficient resources (people, financial, technological, and data) to enable it to focus on assisting adults who seek both full- and part-time enrollment (the one-stop shop concept) and on assisting others in the University with a comparable mission.

In order to set and meet enrollment goals for full- and part-time adults, to assure that entry points are more adult responsive, to move adults from non-degree to degree status, and more, structural changes are needed that increase the level of communication and collaboration between the Enrollment Management and Administration and Outreach divisions. By increasing the levels of collaboration, we build upon existing expertise in both divisions, centralize and use existing enrollment management systems, and create a focus on seamless, continued student enrollment. A model is provided by the OLEAD Case Study Group whose members are from Outreach, Enrollment Management and Administration, and the Center for Adult Learner Services. The Case Study group is meeting to maximize the opportunity created when two academic colleges agreed to award credits to participants of the noncredit Deputy Sheriffs' Academy and the Act 120 (Municipal Police) Academy.

Responsibility must be assigned for an initiative to identify policies and procedures that impede the University's ability to attract and enroll adult learners. Particular attention should be given to issues relating to transfer applicants, responding to adult-specific requests for credit acquisition, and to requirements for high school courses (mathematics, foreign language, and science) that some adults may not have. Once areas for improvement are identified, they must be placed on the agenda of appropriate committees. Further, both centralized and campus-specific efforts are needed to increase the enrollment of adult learners. While University Park-based teams can address policy issues and University-wide procedures regarding Undergraduate Admissions and Registrar functions, the need exists to provide staff training, identify system-based stumbling blocks, and facilitate communication of successful campus-based efforts more broadly. The Commission's Hendrick Best Practices for Adult Learners Conference, the Outreach Professional Development Conference, the Enrollment Management annual conference, and other events can continue to play a role in sharing best practices.

The work of the Adult Data Partnership needs to be institutionalized. Just as staff resources are committed to understanding the undergraduate applicant pool comprised largely of traditional-age students, a concomitant effort to understand as much as possible about adult applicants and enrollees must continue.

Recommendation 4: Responsibility for addressing adult learner retention issues in the University is more diffuse than recruitment and enrollment issues. Components of this retention goal include the following:

- Ensure that services as appropriate (food service, parking, registration, library and computer access, housing, health care, and others) are available for adults.
- Ensure that adult responsive opportunities exist for orientation, recognition, career development, and more.
- Ensure that academic policies and practices are responsive as appropriate to adult learners.

Institutional assessment tools such as CAEL's Adult Learning Focused Institutions (ALFI) Assessment Toolkit could be used at every Penn State campus location to assess the environment for adults. Participating in an assessment would require a commitment at the highest levels of the University of

funds and human resources. In addition, efforts of the Students Affairs Research and Assessment Office and the Adult Data Partnership must be continued and/or institutionalized and findings widely disseminated.

Recommendation 5: The above recommendations have a broad institutional emphasis; however, a strong need exists for campus-based efforts. The Commission recommends that adult learner-focused teams be formed at all campus locations. These small, action-oriented teams should bring together those with expertise and enthusiasm for serving adult learners from the Outreach, Enrollment Management, and student services staffs. Members of these teams should be challenged to identify ways of maximizing the opportunities to transition adult learners from prospective student to enrolled student to Penn State graduate and of ensuring adult-responsive service delivery at crucial steps along the way. Crucial areas for attention include identification of adult-appropriate recruitment initiatives; programs to transition new enrollees; provision of academic programs at times and locations to meet the needs of both the part- and full-time adult learner; supportive classroom climate; learning support for technology, mathematics, and writing; advising along the pre-application to program completion continuum; and more. The intent would be to insure that adult learners are less likely to slip through the cracks – and to other institutions – at key decision-making junctures.

PROCEDURAL RECOMMENDATIONS

In addition to recommending a restructuring of our approach to the recruitment, enrollment, and retention of adult learners, the Commission makes four procedural recommendations. A reader of the October 1990 Report of the Task Force on Adult Student Life and Learning, and earlier reports on Penn State's status vis-à-vis its adult learners, would find that several of these procedural recommendations are recurring themes and issues of importance to adults over which the University has made insufficient progress.

Penn State's existing models for adult learner services are based primarily on serving the traditional-aged student; this template simply does not meet the needs or realities of today's adult learner. We need to focus on the needs of adult learners however they choose to enter and enroll at the University. It is our collective experience that changes benefiting adult learners benefit all students.

Recommendation 6: Financial Issues

Penn State's costs, which are closer to those of private colleges and universities rather than public institutions; the difficult economy which has created joblessness and diminished educational benefits for employees; and adults' tendency to be late applicants for both admission and student aid are a formidable equation for some adults to overcome. Consequently, Penn State must consider ways to increase the ability of adults to afford a Penn State education. In particular, the University needs to increase aid sources, offer realistic payment options, and adopt some adult-focused tuition models. Actions to be considered under each of these categories are noted below:

Increase Aid Sources: For decades the vast majority of University scholarships were written using eligibility criteria that made part-time, provisional, and non-degree students ineligible for scholarships. Unfortunately adult learners, and many working adults, are disproportionately represented in these student categories (see Myth #2). Yet adult learners in the aggregate earn higher grade point averages than

traditional-age students (see Myth #9). In addition, many adult learners are financing their own education and few have access to employee or veteran's benefits (See Myth #7). With the cost of tuition influencing enrollment decisions (See Myth #10), Penn State needs to find ways to create more access to scholarships in order to attract these students and retain them once they have been accepted. We recommend Penn State create more scholarships such as Trustee scholarships that do not have the above limitations, scholarships that would fund a new student's first course, and develop other funds to help the student taking one or two courses. The Commission's Development Committee continues to work toward identifying adults who can be solicited in the future to support scholarships.

In addition, because slightly over half of adult applicants apply for fall admission and the remainder applies for spring and summer, we encourage the Office of Student Aid to earmark campus-based aid for spring and summer first-time enrollees and influence PHEAA to adopt a rolling state grant application deadline. In addition, the certificate programs whose curricula made them eligible to meet aid criteria should be put forward to the state by the Office of Student Aid. Outreach leaders have suggested that lenders be approached about line-of-credit opportunities that might help first-time late applicants meet their educational costs. Finally, funding sources available to low income and/or minority traditional-age students need to be massaged to work for adult learners who meet the same low income and/or minority eligibility criteria.

Payment Options: Currently the person paying in installments or with a credit card is penalized with a fee. These nuisance fees interfere with serving adults who are able to use these options sans penalties in other aspects of their lives; these fees need to be eliminated. The adult learner whose employer will reimburse a portion of the tuition costs should find Penn State payment practices that permit the student to pay their portion and submit proof of employer payment for the remainder of the bill.

Adult-focused Tuition Models: For example, institute tuition rates based on programs or hours of the day the course is offered (for example, evening or weekend courses are less expensive), offer lower per credit tuition rates during the summer sessions when adult learners are likely to begin or continue enrollment. Create special offers such as a reduced tuition rate to evening students for their first six credits. Or reduce the initial tuition rate for Penn State alumni who have not completed their degree. Some of these enticements will help the adult whose late applicant situation or whose limited credit load removes them from consideration for existent funds.

Recommendation 7: Admissions and Enrollment Issues

Penn State must develop a comprehensive Web site for adult learners that can be readily located and not buried layers deep from those investigating enrollment or re-enrollment. Create adult-friendly admission and re-enrollment processes that identify and recognize adult learners upon application and provide them with a series of prompts about actions that they might want or need to take. Penn State accepts alternate methods of credit acquisition, such as CLEP, American Council on Education's College Credit Recommendation Service, and portfolio assessment. These methods must be promoted more broadly, made more responsive, and be understood by more of the staff who work with adult applicants and enrollees.

Adult applicants can and do present credits from multiple institutions, some recent and some earned years ago, as well as extensive work and professional experience. Credits that do not transfer to fulfill degree requirements essentially increase these students' educational costs and the amount of time it will

take them to complete a degree. The transfer adult currently does not feel well served by the transfer credit process. The University of Phoenix has a credit summary that tells prospective students immediately what credits will transfer. We must address the difficulties presented to applicants when courses transfer as general rather than as course-to-course transfers; and we must be prepared to provide transfer applicants with pre-admission and pre-enrollment assessments of how previous study enables them to meet degree requirements.

Recommendation 8: Faculty Development, Curricula, and Advising Issues

Adult learner research indicates that adult learners connect with the institution via their faculty and their engagement in the classroom with faculty and fellow students. We recommend that the Schreyer Institute for Teaching Excellence, the Royer Center, and other offices in the University with faculty development responsibilities should become more engaged in programming and communication with the academic leadership at each campus about how faculty can create an affirming classroom environment for adults.

Many adult learners are career oriented and attracted to certificates and majors in education, health, business, and computer technology/engineering. Does Penn State have the programs these adults want when and where they want them? The decision made years ago to remove Continuing Education from campus-based credit offerings has contributed to a preoccupation with full-time enrollments, perceived disregard for the working adult who studies part-time, and a loss of understanding about the curriculum sought by adults. Since many adults also are transfer students (See Myth #4) who cannot access these closed enrollment programs at University Park, the Commission recommends Penn State ensure that courses in these high interest programs are offered at other times during late afternoon, evening, and weekend hours and use technology to bring more of these majors to more Penn State locations. The October 2003 Pulse survey shows that 42% of respondents considered the ability to take evening/weekend courses a factor in coming to Penn State.³⁸ These adult students will be motivated, high performing learners interested in programs that the Brookings Institute's *Back to Posterity* and the College of Agriculture Sciences' *Road to 2004* reports recommend as a focus for supporting and improving Pennsylvania's economic climate.

We also recommend Penn State seek avenues for better advising adult students – the non-degree adult, the adult who wants to know how previous study meets graduation requirements before applying, and the re-enrollee. Most adult learners do not attend FTCAP because they are late applicants, transfer students, re-enrollees, non-degree students, or non-degree to degree students. Because aspects of the University Park FTCAP have a traditional-age student focus, some adults who attended have felt that it did not meet their needs. Advisers also need to assume a more vigorous role assisting the adult transfer student with transfer credit issues and the adult learner seeking to earn credit through portfolio assessment, CLEP, and other means.

Recommendation 9: Student Services and Student Life Issues

While Penn State seeks to increase adult enrollments, it also must address adult learner retention. For adult learners, that translates into hiring faculty who support their presence in their classrooms and who are responsive to the out-of-class situations adults can face. Adults seek orientation programs that enable them to meet others like themselves, that address their concerns about functioning in Penn State's

³⁸ See <http://www.sa.psu.edu/sara/chronopulse.shtml>; select 114 – Adult Learners

technology-reliant teaching and learning environment, and that acquaint them with learning support, library, career, and other support services. Staff in these crucial offices must interact with adults in an appropriate manner. Each location must assess its physical facilities to determine if they support and affirm the presence of adult commuting students, the evening adult, and the residential adult. Campuses should assure that recognition programs and adult honor societies for the part-time student, such as Alpha Sigma Lambda, are in place to celebrate adult learners' achievements. Adults should have opportunities to involve their family members or be involved themselves in out-of-class activities. For five years, the Commission for Adult Learners has funded an Incentive Grant program which has supported the creation of new and innovative adult recruitment and retention programs and services. The Commission's Web site contains a listing of funded Incentive Grant programs and services which may be adopted and adapted by others.

CONCLUSION

What Penn State must do to attract and to retain adult learners can be done. Success will require the University to coordinate and communicate more effectively across its many campus locations and across its several delivery options. We must let adult learners know and give them an immediate sense that *Penn State can meet your needs no matter where you are—You are Penn State!*

We must recruit, enroll, and retain students more efficiently and effectively system-wide. Successful enrollment management is absolutely necessary to rebuild the adult population at Penn State. We must coordinate and communicate more effectively across our many parts—program-to-program, campus to campus, department to department. It is time to forsake our crazy quilt approach and create a more systematic approach that puts into place the important pieces that will create coherent program offerings, and avenues of access and movement through and across the Penn State system.

Adult learners have much to offer Penn State. Adult students have higher GPAs on average, than traditional age students; they raise the level of discourse in most classrooms—they will enrich the experience of our traditional age students, just as we are enriched by their insights and desire to return to the classroom.

The Principles for effectively working with adult learners have long been established by CAEL. Penn State has only to challenge itself to meet these standards for success. The reality: Penn State has many of the pieces in place. We need only to summon the will and the desire to succeed. Now is the time to return adult learners to Penn State.

APPENDIX

Commission Surveys/Data Collection

1. Co-sponsor of the Adult Applicant Survey, May 2003
2. Member of the Adult Data Partnership
3. Co-sponsor of the November 1999 Pulse Survey of Adult Learners
4. Co-sponsor of the October 2003 Pulse Survey of Newly Enrolled Adults
5. Co-sponsor of the Best Practices Focus Groups Held at Three Campus College Locations

Other Reports

1. Brookings Institute, <http://www.brookings.edu/Pennsylvania>

Activities

1. Hendrick Best Practices for Adult Learners Conference
2. Incentive Grant Program