Adult Learner Programs & Services Focus Groups  
Spring 2013  

Introduction  
In order to explore the unique challenges adult learners face, including their academic experiences, participation in cocurricular activities, and interactions with traditional-aged students, Penn State’s office of Adult Learner Programs and Services (ALPS), in collaboration with Student Affairs Research and Assessment (SARA), conducted six student focus groups. The focus groups took place on February 18th, 2013 and were facilitated by key University administrators. The focus groups lasted approximately 90 minutes and included a diverse population of 21 adult learners, including parents, veterans, and working professionals.

Methods  
The six focus groups occurred concurrently in groups of 2-5 and were led by a facilitator who was aided by a note-taker. Note that these groups are considerably smaller than the groups that participated in 2012. Facilitators were high-level University administrators chosen for their interest in adult learners. Before the discussion began, participants were asked to complete a brief survey to provide information on their participation in a variety of student services, their needs, and their perceptions of advising (see Appendix A). The focus group protocol provided a semi-structured framework for the discussion while allowing room to explore divergent topics (See Appendix B). Emergent themes from the responses were analyzed by SARA staff and the results of this analysis are reported below. Data from the survey are integrated into the focus group findings. Note that many of the themes and responses are consistent with the results from the 2012 focus groups.

Summary of Findings  

Priorities as a Student  
Most students discussed a concern with balancing their commitments to school, work, and their personal lives. Many expressed doing well in their courses as the top priority, but almost all mentioned other aspects of their lives that they were trying to balance with the added commitment of their schooling. These other commitments were most often family obligations and work demands. Several students mentioned the desire to advance their careers or to do well in order to go on to graduate school.

Challenges of Being an Adult Learner  
Students reiterated their concerns with balancing all aspects of their lives when discussing the difficulties associated with being an adult learner. It was noted that this difficulty in balancing various commitments made it harder to be involved socially than it is for the typical undergraduate student. Attendance policies were also cited as a concern, as some students’ health issues or family obligations made it difficult to attend every scheduled class. Adult learners expressed the want for faculty members to recognize that some of the expectations set for traditional students are not as realistic for adult learners. Several also indicated that it was difficult in some ways being so different from most of the students they are in class with. The generational gap was noticeable and frustrating at times.
Housing for some students was a challenge. Some had trouble locating affordable housing in a convenient location to campus. Related to the affordability of housing, students in the military noted that their housing allowance is not sufficient.

A number of students discussed struggling with their academics upon returning to school. These students found it difficult to find the resources they need to be successful. Part of the difficulty for some was the need to schedule remedial courses to refresh topics they had not studied recently enough to remember.

Interactions with Traditional-Aged Students
Participants in the focus groups shared mixed feelings on their interactions with traditional-aged students. As stated above, some found the generational gap to be quite noticeable. These students noted that many traditional-aged students were less respectful during class time, talking to others, texting on their phones, and using laptops for unrelated purposes during class. Some students felt that many of the traditional students do not take their studies as seriously as adult learners do.

However, other participants found interactions with traditional students to be easy. They expressed that once they got to know each other or worked together it became less awkward and that there was no ageism present. One even noted that students in her program were extremely professional and she felt motivated to do well because of their hard work. Given the current data it is difficult to determine what circumstances lead to these varying interpretations of interactions with other students.

Classroom Experiences and Interactions with Faculty and Advisers
Adult learners in the focus groups generally discussed positive interactions with faculty members, with only a couple indications that it was difficult to reach or meet with faculty. Several discussed that it was best to get in touch with faculty members early on in the course in order to establish a rapport, which made future interactions easier. The positive statements regarding faculty interaction are echoed in the responses to the entrance survey as 85% indicated that they felt that faculty and staff recognize the unique needs of adult learners.

One negative comment regarding faculty interaction worthy of noting compared the experience at University Park to being at one of the Commonwealth Campuses. This student noted that it was much easier to reach out to faculty and that faculty were more responsive at his previous campus (the campus location was not noted). Despite this being reported by only one of the focus group members, it is mentioned here as it is consistent with some of the responses to the Change of Campus Pulse Survey.

Not as many opinions on advising were shared during the focus groups, but when they were it was generally to say that they were lacking the direction they needed. However, this contradicts what appears to be a generally good impression of the advising based on the entrance questionnaire, which indicated that 75% of the respondents were satisfied with the advising they have received.

Campus Involvement and Sense of Community among Adult Learners
Several students indicated that they have gotten involved in veterans groups on campus. Many participants, however, cited the many obligations and demands on their time as limiting their ability to be involved as much on campus. For most adult learners it is difficult to make it to programming offered in the evenings because of priorities outside of school. This is reflected in the fact that less than half (45%) of the respondents have attended an adult learner event. While some do connect with clubs and
organizations on campus, one student summed up the consensus by stating simply, “Making connections with other students is hard.”

Other students were not aware of opportunities to connect with other adult learners at all. One student stated, “If there’s a community, let me know. I don’t have a family, my boyfriend is far away. Don’t do anything on weekends. Trying to find running clubs, but not succeeding. Hard to find people who don’t drink heavily. Would love to be a part of something.”

University Services
When asked about university services, most students discussed places on campus to study or work. Most mentioned the HUB or library, with a couple also noting the space in Boucke and in the Student Veterans Office. While these locations were all mentioned, most indicated that they were insufficient because it was difficult to actually find a quiet location or that the location was “drab” and not conducive to working. There was a general sense that students wanted a space specifically for adult learners and 80% indicated as such on the entrance questionnaire.

Other concerns indicated a lack of awareness of what is available on campus. Some students expressed a need for résumé workshops or help finding internships. At the same time others described getting help from career services and finding assistance with internships. The lack of awareness of resources is evident in responses to some of the entrance questionnaire responses. Only 42% knew how to locate scholarship opportunities for adult learners and veterans, 18% knew how to find information on the child care subsidy and, 47% knew about the Stay and Study space in Boucke. While a majority of students (76%) were aware of the supplemental instruction and tutorial services available, only 30% had actually used these services.

Implications
The results from this round of focus groups in many ways reinforce what was found in the 2012 focus groups. Especially evident is that adult learners seem to be unaware of some of the resources and opportunities that are available to them. Assessing the effectiveness of various communication strategies with adult learners may help with this concern. Additionally, future inquiries (whether surveys, focus groups, or some other method) could attempt to engage adult learners in a dialogue about what ways they would like to receive communication.

Another consistent concern related to spaces available for adult learners on campus. Once again, adult learners expressed a desire for a designated space for spending time and studying. Not all students were aware of what space does exist and those that did suggested that the space could be improved.

The results regarding faculty are encouraging. While students expressed some difficulty in working around attendance policies, the general indication was that faculty members are sensitive to the unique needs and concerns of adult learners. While a majority of students were satisfied with their advising, there was a vocal minority that felt like they were not getting the support they need. Efforts to communicate to academic advisers how adult learners’ needs and circumstances differ from traditional students should be evaluated. Strengthening partnerships with academic advising may be a key benefit to adult learners moving forward.
## Appendix A – Preliminary Survey Summary

### As a new student:*  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>YES</th>
<th>NO</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Did you attend FTCAP, the First-Year Testing, Counseling, and Advising Program?</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Did you attend an orientation program?</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>13</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Did you attend an open house?</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Were you informed about Adult Learner Programs?</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Were you informed about the Office of Veterans Programs?</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Some participants indicated “not applicable” on these questions (Q1 n=3, Q2 n=2, Q3 n=2, Q4 n=2, and Q5 n=6). Not applicable responses are not included in the percentages reported.

### Are you aware of:  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>YES</th>
<th>NO</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6. The Adult Learner Handbook online posted on the adult learner website?</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. How to locate financial scholarships designated for adult learners and student veterans?</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. How to locate information regarding the child care subsidy?*</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>12</td>
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<tr>
<td>9. The Stay and Study Space located in Boucke 203?</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Supplemental instruction and tutorial services offered by Penn State Learning located in Boucke, Sparks, and Wagner buildings?</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>5</td>
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</table>

*Some participants indicated “not applicable” on Q8 (n=18). Not applicable responses are not included in the percentages reported.

### Have you ever:  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>YES</th>
<th>NO</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>11. Used supplemental instruction and tutorial services offered by Penn State Learning located in Boucke, Sparks, and Wagner buildings?</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Attended an adult learner event (open house, game night or workshop)?</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Attended the annual Outstanding Adult Student Award Reception?</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Would you like:*  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>YES</th>
<th>NO</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>14. To have a designated adult learner or student veteran orientation day?</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. To see campus publications emphasize a commitment to serving adult learners?</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>4</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*Some participants indicated “not applicable” on these questions (Q14 n=3, Q15 n=3). Not applicable responses are not included in the percentages reported.
16. Are you aware of the campus commissions:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>YES</th>
<th>NO</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Commission for Women</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Commission on LGBT Equity</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Commission on Racial/Ethnic Diversity (CORED)</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Commission for Adult Learners</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

17. Do you feel that faculty and staff recognize the special needs and circumstances that adult students face?*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>YES</th>
<th>NO</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>17</td>
<td>3</td>
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*Some participants indicated “not applicable” on Q17 (n=2). Not applicable responses are not included in the percentages reported.

18. What is your level of expertise when it comes to technology?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>LOW</th>
<th>MED</th>
<th>HIGH</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
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19. Do you use Facebook?

<table>
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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>YES</th>
<th>NO</th>
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<td></td>
<td>17</td>
<td>4</td>
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</table>

20. Have you attended one of the free, monthly, technology workshops?

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>YES</th>
<th>NO</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
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</table>

21. Have you used the ITS services for students?*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>YES</th>
<th>NO</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>13</td>
<td>8</td>
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</table>

22. Have you used free online video tutorials at Lynda.com?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>YES</th>
<th>NO</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
<td>14</td>
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</table>

23. Would you like to participate in an education abroad or internship opportunity before graduating?*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>YES</th>
<th>NO</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>17</td>
<td>4</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*Some participants indicated “not applicable” on these questions (Q21 n=1, Q23 n=1). Not applicable responses are not included in the percentages reported.

27. Do you utilize an adviser via face-to-face, email or online for selecting classes?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Face-to-face</th>
<th>Email/Online</th>
<th>Both</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8 (44%)</td>
<td>1 (5%)</td>
<td>9 (50%)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

28. How satisfied are you with your adviser?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Dissatisfied</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Satisfied</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>5 (25%)</td>
<td>15 (75%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Open-Ended Items

If you had funding to participate in Education Abroad, what other challenges would you face in doing so?

- Full-time job
- Time frame to graduation, courses needed to be offered.
- Paying for my family to go.
- Family commitments
- Leaving my family behind
- Obligation to the PA National Guard
- Single, no kids, so it would not be that difficult
- Student Aid would not cover the program I was interested in
- Honestly, while I would love to go abroad, it’s just not feasible for non-adult reasons. I’m extremely involved with THON and other programs and can’t just leave for a whole semester.
- Personal responsibilities
- I have a cat and nowhere to board him but a kennel – not an option for me more than a week.
- Taking off work or going on leave to be able to study abroad.
- A cat-sitter and house-sitter
- No challenges except funding
- Rent and bills at home

What types of cultural programs or experiences have you had as a Penn State student?

- World in Conversation
- Took a media & democracy course, very engaging.
- CAS 100 introduced different perspectives on issues.
- Enrolled in German (if that qualifies)
- PSU Belly Dance Club
- Antipode
- SAI
- I have made friends with students of other cultures, and I’m taking a “History of World Religion” class.
- THON participation
- Veterans organization
- Black Men Empowerment group meetings
- Chinese 001-003
- Lead Mentor of the Multicultural Engineering Program
- My awareness of issues facing the public and special interest groups. I have been exposed to many.
- Have been introduced to a variety of diverse cultures, people, and programs.
What types of assistance would you like to receive regarding transitioning to a new career?

- Career Fair
- Help understanding USAJobs.gov
- Citizenship information – do companies require it?
- Career placement
- Resume writing class
- Highly technical hands-on experience
- I think the existing career resources (at least in Engineering) are fine. Maybe a workshop or two on how to emphasize the value we bring as experienced adults.
- Mentorship with alumni and Adult Ed services
- Unsure
- Learn about opportunities
- Going on to graduate school
- Definitely career services – resume/portfolio
- Resume help
- Resume transfer from military to civilian transition

What types of advising challenges do you face?

- I’ve been given excellent advice by my advisor, but my son has had some difficulty with IST advisors.
- Controlled courses
- Possible withdraw from college Fall 2013 – Fall 2014 or a possible transfer to PSU Brandywine.
- N/A – really like my advisor
- None really. I didn’t like my old advisor, so, I picked a new one because I knew he was awesome.
- Adapting to scheduling needs. However, our benefits rely on credits taken and those needs are hard to meet when classes fill up quickly.
- As an adult student with health challenges, it is difficult to schedule classes that are compatible with my abilities. My advisor has been extremely helpful in this area.
- Working with prior education and transferring that education as accreditation.
- Scheduling time when I don’t feel rushed.
- Transitioning credits

What criteria do you think should be used in selecting the Outstanding Adult Student Award recipient?

#1
- Sacrifices
• Being able to balance family (kids) and school. I’m single and no kids, school is a challenge.
• Number of credits and semester GPA standing.
• Grades
• 2.5 – 3.5 GPA
• Mentor to other adult learners
• Participation in school functions/clubs
• Academic excellence
• Campus Involvement
• Academic achievement
• Financial need
• Life challenges and ability to overcome adversity
• Life responsibilities

#2
• GPA
• Academic achievement
• Number of dependents
• Achievements
• Second year or higher
• Participation in the community
• Community Service/Involvement
• Personal background
• Community awareness/service
• 3.0+ GPA
• Grades, course load, and work load (Jobs($)) – good balance
• Personal trials learned by interview with students
• Work load

#3
• Complexity of schedule
• Participation – school or community. Coaching a kids team would count.
• Family/work regularly
• Work commitments, other committees
• Knowledge of PSU and the community
• Grades
• Creativity
• Academic achievement
• Actions in Adult Ed
• Professor recommendations
• Extracurricular activities
Appendix B – Focus Group Protocol

1. What are your priorities as a student and how do they shape your experience?

2. What challenges do you face as a student at Penn State? (How do you juggle your multiple responsibilities while seeking a degree?)

3. Describe your classroom experiences: What has been easy? What are the challenges?

4. How would you describe a successful student experience at Penn State? How can the University’s services and programs be improved to provide you with that experience?

5. Describe your typical interactions with Penn State faculty or staff members?

6. Is there a sense of community among adult learners and veterans? If so, what is it like? If not, why do you think that is? Have you been able to meet other adult learners in class or on campus?

7. While you are on campus, how do you spend time outside of class? Have you found a comfortable place to relax or study? Are you involved in club or volunteer activities?

8. What University programs and services have you used? Tell us about that experience.

9. What keeps you from participating more fully in campus activities?

10. New students at Penn State are required to quickly learn how to use eLion, ANGEL, Webmail and other learning and information technologies. How well prepared were you for these challenges? How can Penn State do a better job at supporting student technology use?

11. What other things would you like to share with us about your experiences?

12. Do you have questions for us?