Commission for Adult Learners

Report from

2015-16 Implementation Taskforce

2015-16 Strategic Task Force Members:

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1.- INTRODUCTION

Since its inception in 1998, the Commission for Adult Learners has served as the advocacy group for adult learners at Penn State. Over the past decade, the Commission has conducted several studies on adult learner issues and made recommendations for improving the recruitment, retention, and success of adult learners at Penn State.

During Academic Year 2014-15, the Adult Learner Access and Affordability Task Force identified six barriers to adult learner access and affordability and made a number of recommendations to address them. As a follow up to these recommendations, the Commission created the Access and Affordability Initiatives Implementation Task Force and charged it with two specific tasks for 2015-2016:

(a) To facilitate the implementation of the recommendation to revisit the lack of an adult degree completion option by working with the Office of the Vice President for Commonwealth Campuses in consultation with the Vice President and Dean for Undergraduate Education and other stakeholders on potential degree completion programs for adult learners.

(b) To facilitate the implementation of the recommendation of reining in cost for adult learners by investigating and proposing new tuition models after conducting a national scan. One example could be the idea of spreading full-time tuition across multiple semesters for part-time adult learners.

The Task force worked under the leadership of the Commission’s chair-elect, Dr. Albert Lozano. As a result of its work the Task Force has created the following report presenting its findings and recommendations for future work. This report is divided into two parts, each one of them addressing one of the two specific tasks.

2.- DEGREE COMPLETION PROGRAM

Background

One of the barriers to adult learner access and affordability identified by the 2014-15 Adult Learner Access and Affordability Taskforce was the lack of an adult degree completion option for adult learners. This is not a new concern at Penn State as the first formal recommendation for an adult degree completion option appears to have been made by the Committee to Attract and Retain Adult Students at Penn State in a report submitted in May 2006. Furthermore, in the spring of 2011, Dr. Rodney Erickson charged the Adult Degree Completion Task Force to look into and recommend adult degree completion options to service the significant market of adults in Pennsylvania without a bachelor’s degree. That Taskforce submitted a report in the spring of 2012 with specific recommendations regarding a Bachelor of Professional Studies
degree specifically focused on Healthcare Management with the recommendation to further investigate the possibility of a similar Bachelor of Professional Studies focused on Engineering and yet a new General degree on Professional Studies. Interestingly, all the other recommendations submitted by that taskforce appeared to have been well received except this specific one. Most of the questions and concerns seemed to have been focused on the ‘Professional Studies’ nature of the degree, the most appropriate academic home for the degree, entrance requirements for the degree and the maximum number of credits that could be transferred into Penn State from other institutions.

Given the recommendations of the 2014-15 Taskforce and the fact that the issue of a degree completion program had been the subject of previous reports to the University leadership, the Commission decided that it was worth revisiting the issue. This was done after considering that adult learners have a strong interest in degree programs that will help advance their careers. Penn State now has in place a strong marketing protocol to identify, vet, and implement degree programs that meet the needs of adult learners.

In the summer of 2015, Dr. Francis Achampong, the 2015-2016 chair of the Commission for Adult Learners started conversations with senior administrators at the Office of the Vice President for Commonwealth Campuses with the goal of resurrecting the possibility of developing a degree completion program. These conversations identified possible issues with the number of credits transferred into Penn State from other institutions and the assessment of previous learning experiences among others. The group also discussed the possibility of using academic programs currently available at Penn State as the vehicle to deliver the degree completion program. The discussion ended with agreement that the Commission for Adult Learners will work with the Office of the Vice President for Commonwealth Campuses in consultation with the Office of Undergraduate Education to identify programs in the University College’s portfolio that might provide viable adult degree completion pathways for adult learners interested in a Penn State degree.

The 2015-16 Taskforce on the issue of degree completion program

In considering its approach to the development of a degree completion program, the 2015-16 Taskforce considered the following questions and issues:

- Is it necessary to differentiate between adult learners with no (or very limited) prior college experience or credits from those adult learners with a substantial amount of college credits?

- What would be the most adequate delivery mechanism for courses in a degree completion program? It is important to balance the support services offered at the residential campuses with the flexibility offered by courses entirely delivered online.
• What support services will be required to help adult learners who have been out of college for several years to become successful in this degree completion program?

• A generic degree completion program may not satisfy the program specific needs of students.

• It is not clear how a Bachelor of Professional Studies degree would be accepted by the marketplace and employers. It is also necessary to study how graduates of this program could continue their education at the graduate level.

• While the previous report recommended offering these courses in an accelerated format of 7 or 8 weeks to minimize the time these adult learners are in school, it is necessary to consider the academic ramifications of such offerings. This is especially important for learners that are just returning to college after a long hiatus.

The Integrated Social Sciences Degree (ISOSC)

As the 2015-16 Taskforce continued exploring the options for a degree completion program, it learned that the College of the Liberal Arts was working on the development of a new degree in Integrated Social Sciences (http://bulletins.psu.edu/undergrad/programs/baccalaureate/I/ISOSC) to be shortly submitted for approval to the University. The ISOSC will be delivered through the World Campus. The Commission invited Diana Gruendler, the lead faculty member in this program and Ryan Fisher, responsible for the development of the ISOSC program, to its March meeting in which they presented the main requirements for this degree. These can be summarized as (for full requirements please refer to Appendix A):

• Requirements for the Major are 51 to 55 credits. These include 0-18 credits of General Education, 0-6 credits in Quantification, 0-6 credits of General education in Social Sciences and 0-6 credits in General Education in Humanities. It is important to note that 0-18 credits may double count for Requirements for the Major and General Education. This frees up credits that students may use for electives, resulting in greater ability to use transfer credits.

• Two prescribed courses (3 credits each) that must be completed at Penn State. The first course, LA 201W is intended to help students consider their personal educational and professional experiences in the context of pursuing their education. This course is also a preparation for utilizing Prior Learning Assessment and credit by portfolio. The second course, LA 496 is the capstone experience.
• Other requirements involve 6-8 credits in Quantification, 3-4 credits in Statistics, 3 credits in Ethics and 3-4 credits in Research Methods. Students enrolled in this program can choose from a wide variety of courses in each one of these areas.
• 30 credits in Supporting and Related Areas, which at least 15 credits at the 400-level.
• 20-40 credits of electives considering that some General Education courses may double up counting for the major. It is anticipated that students will have 36-39 elective credits at their disposal.

In a press release in April 2016 announcing the creation of this program that will admit its first students in Fall 2016, (http://news.psu.edu/story/405650/2016/04/21/academics/penn-state-launches-new-degree-completion-program), the developers of the ISOSC program reinforce that this is a degree aimed towards helping adult learners to complete a Penn State education, especially given the fact that students can transfer up to 90 credits.

Taskforce Recommendations on Integrated Social Sciences degree

With the creation and approval of the Integrated Social Sciences degree the need for a degree completion program has been satisfied as it gives adult learners a very flexible option to obtain a Penn State degree.

As the ISOSC degree starts accepting students for Fall 2016, the Taskforce recommends:

• to monitor the enrollments in the ISOSC degree;
• to continue the conversations with the faculty in charge of the ISOSC degree;
• to work with the ISOSC faculty to explore the possibility of including options in this degree; and
• to capture student stories of their experience in the program and use of degree upon graduation.

3.- REINING IN THE COST OF A PENN STATE EDUCATION FOR ADULT LEARNERS

Background

An additional barrier identified by the 2014-15 Adult Learner Access and Affordability Taskforce is the cost associated to obtaining the degree. This is especially important in the case of adult learners that complete their degree on a part-time basis.

Penn State has a two-tier tuition model: a flat fee in which any credits after 12 credits do not increase tuition cost and a pay-per-credit for students enrolled in less than 12 credits. This
tuition model incentivizes full-time students as they typically take 15 to 18 credits per semester. However, this creates a tuition differential between full-time students and students that complete their degree solely on a part-time basis. Depending on their program of study and other variables, students obtaining a Penn State degree on an exclusively part-time basis may end up paying on average $15,000 more than their peers in the same program completing it on a full-time basis. While considering these figures it is important to note that about 60% of the undergraduate adult learners complete their degree on a part-time basis and that part-time students typically enroll in 6 to 9 credits per semester.

The 2015-16 Taskforce on the issue of Tuition Differential

The Taskforce started working on this topic by researching the cost models used by our sister institutions at the Big Ten Universities. The Taskforce did not find any of these institutions that provided a somewhat reduced costs to part-time students. However, it is important to note the following:

- At Purdue University the flat fee starts at 8 credits. Purdue also has a reduced per-credit charge for part-time students.
- At the University of Wisconsin, students who have accumulated 165 credits or 30 credits beyond what is required by their program and have not graduated are assessed a surcharge equal to 100 percent of the regular resident tuition on credits beyond that level.

While exploring possible models to eliminate the tuition differential, the Taskforce was fully aware of the economic, financial and political ramifications of a possible change of the tuition model used for part-time students. The Commission sponsors encouraged the Taskforce to propose unique initiatives to alleviate this tuition differential. Given the lack of initiatives in support of part-time students at other public institutions, moving forward with an initiative to support these students would give Penn State national recognition for its efforts on access and affordability for all students. This is very critical at a point in which the public institutions in the Commonwealth seem to have initiated a move towards eliminating the flat-fee tuition rate in favor of a pay-per-credit rate which may significantly impact the cost of a degree for all students March 28 article from the Pittsburgh Post Gazette is available here. [http://www.post-gazette.com/news/education/2016/03/28/IUP-to-drop-flat-full-time-in-state-undergraduate-tuition-in-favor-of-per-credit-pricing/stories/201603280085](http://www.post-gazette.com/news/education/2016/03/28/IUP-to-drop-flat-full-time-in-state-undergraduate-tuition-in-favor-of-per-credit-pricing/stories/201603280085).

The Taskforce is in favor of exploring the possibility of creating a three tier model for tuition charges that will help to minimize the existing tuition differential:
• Full-time after enrolling in 12 or more credits in which students pay a flat fee (currently in place);
• Pay-per-credit (currently in place)
• A new ‘regular part-time’ tuition schedule to be used to assess tuition charges for students that are pursuing their education exclusively on a part-time basis.

The introduction of this new ‘regular part-time’ tuition schedule will alleviate the differential in the cost for a degree among students. The key issue is now to determine the most appropriate model for this new tuition schedule.

The Taskforce and the Commission sponsors brainstormed on several approaches including:

• Students purchase “bundles” of credits similar to full-time students although these can be spread over more than one semester.
• After having completed a predetermined number of credits at Penn State, part-time students could receive a substantial discount in their several credits.

Penn State University President, Dr. Barron attended one of the Commission meetings in which the Taskforce presented to him the need to develop an alternate tuition model for students that intend to obtain their degree exclusively on a part-time basis as a way to make an impact on and increase degree completion for these students. President Barron requested that the Commission and the Taskforce investigate approaches that result in revenue-neutral models to determine the feasibility of this new ‘regular part-time tuition’.

The Taskforce understands that any reduction in the tuition differential to the cost of a degree will result in a reduction in tuition income to Penn State. Possible avenues to mitigate or eliminate the impact of this new model are by:

• increase the number of part-time students that choose to attend Penn State as a result of the part-time friendly tuition schedule.
• utilize the new Capital Campaign to actively pursue gifts specifically designated for adult, part-time learners to complete their degree.

In order to quantify the financial impact of the new ‘regular part-time’ tuition schedule, the Taskforce needed to have a more detailed understanding of part-time student contribution to the University budget. The Taskforce requested the appropriate data to the different University offices:
Office of Planning and Assessment: Student data consisting of average number of credits taken by full-time and part-time students, average time for degree-completion for these populations.

Budget Office: Tuition income generated by full-time and part-time students excluding summer semesters.

Both offices were very responsive to the Taskforce requests to the point of providing not just the requested data but a very comprehensive set of data in which the information was further categorized by additional variables such as campus, residence status, adult vs traditional learner, college granting degree, etc. However, because there are two different sources of data (Office of Planning and Assessment and Budget Office) which do not follow the same categorization, accessing the necessary information is not immediate.

Taskforce Recommendations on Reining in the Cost of Degree Completion for part-time students

The Taskforce recognizes that equalizing the cost for a degree between full-time and part-time students is a very important goal to continue fulfilling the mission of Penn State. For this reason, and to avoid the problems associated with making rushed judgements, we recommend extending this specific item to future groups within the Commission. In order to find out the real financial cost to the University of introducing a new “regular, part-time tuition schedule”, we recommend:

- To continue the work started by the 2015-16 Taskforce by doing a deep analysis of the data obtained from the Office of Planning and Assessment and the Budget Office.
- To carry out this analysis by selecting a small number of campuses with medium to large population of part-time students.
- Given the potential need for data specific to the selected campuses, senior leadership from these campuses should be represented on the Commission.
- After completing the analysis for these campuses, it will be necessary to consider the students in World Campus.
- Once these analysis are completed, and a clear understanding of the impact of the different possible tuition models emerges, the Commission can continue the discussions with its sponsors and the senior leadership at the University.
Appendix A

University Bulletin

Undergraduate Degree Programs

Integrated Social Sciences

University Park, College of the Liberal Arts (ISOSC): offered via World Campus

Paul C. Taylor, Professor in Charge

The social sciences are concerned with the study of society and the relations among individuals and institutions within society. The multi-disciplinary Bachelor of Science in Integrated Social Sciences synthesizes the broad sweep of the content, theories, and methodologies of the social sciences. The program draws on core social science disciplines: Anthropology, Communication Arts and Sciences, Economics, Political Science, Psychology, and Sociology. A final capstone portfolio will document integration and synthesis of major themes explored in the program.

Upon completing the program of study, students should be able to articulate the varied theoretical and applied methodologies and interrelationships across the social sciences; communicate effectively using the language and constructs of the social sciences; apply critical thinking in analyzing and applying social science perspectives to society’s problems; demonstrate the ability to understand, evaluate, and critique the results of social science quantitative and qualitative research; formulate, debate, and articulate arguments about social phenomena; and recognize and solve ethical dilemmas in social contexts.

For the B.S. degree in Integrated Social Sciences, a minimum of 120 credits is required.

Per Senate Policy 83-60.1, "Per University Faculty Senate Policy 83-60.1, every candidate for a degree shall earn as a degree candidate at least 36 of the last 60 credits required for a baccalaureate degree in courses offered by the University or in cooperative degree programs that have been established by formal agreement and approved by the University Faculty Senate."

Scheduling Recommendation by Semester Standing given like (Sem: 1-2)

GENERAL EDUCATION: 45 credits
(0-18 of these 45 credits are included in the REQUIREMENTS FOR THE MAJOR)
(See description of General Education in front of Bulletin.)

FIRST-YEAR SEMINAR:
(Included in the ELECTIVES or GENERAL EDUCATION course selections)

UNITED STATES CULTURES AND INTERNATIONAL CULTURES:
(Included in ELECTIVES, GENERAL EDUCATION course selection, or REQUIREMENTS FOR THE MAJOR)

WRITING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM:
(Included in REQUIREMENTS FOR THE MAJOR)

ELECTIVES: 20-42 credits

REQUIREMENTS FOR THE MAJOR: 51-55 credits [1]
(This includes 0-18 credits of General Education courses; 0-6 credits of GQ courses; 0-6 credits of GS courses, and 0-6 credits of GH courses)

PRESCRIBED COURSES (6 credits)