FIVE THINGS

FIVE THINGS Student Affairs Professionals Can Do to Support **ADULT LEARNERS**

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FIVE THINGS ISSUE BRIEF SERIES

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Student affairs professionals have a meaningful role to play in supporting the success of adult learners—a diverse and growing proportion of today's students[1] hoping to better position themselves in the 21st century workforce. Nearly 40% of all enrolled college students are 25 years of age or older, and this number is projected to rise (Snyder, de Brey, & Dillow, 2018). Adult learners—usually considered students ages 25 or older—come to institutions with a wide range of characteristics, responsibilities, and life experiences. Often referred to as "nontraditional" students, members of this population frequently have to balance their education with other family or work-related priorities. Approximately 43% of full-time and 78% of part-time undergraduate students work while in college, and 26% of all undergraduates are parents of dependent children (Noll, Gault, & Reichlin, 2017; Snyder et al., 2018).

The policies and practices of student affairs professionals are largely rooted in the understanding of student development theories, but many of these theories are seen through the lens of the "traditional" student, who is young, residence hall–dwelling, and financially dependent, and may view college as the primary agent for nonacademic social experiences (Kasworm, 2014). A postsecondary education system designed around traditional-aged students does not adequately meet the needs of the single parent enrolling part time and working 40 or more hours a week, the returning veteran transitioning into civilian life with a wealth of military training and expertise, or the displaced manufacturing worker joining a program after recently earning a General Education Diploma.

Adult learners tend to experience certain challenges to completing a postsecondary credential that their traditional-aged counterparts do not. Literature suggests that barriers faced by adult learners can be sorted into three categories: (a) situational, (b) dispositional, and (c) institutional (Fairchild, 2003; Mason, 2016; Mercer, 1993). Situational barriers are those created from significant time constraints and high costs of attendance, including tuition and fees, child care, transportation, and health-related expenses. Dispositional barriers include instances in which adult learners have feelings of stress, anxiety, guilt, or exclusion caused by

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[1] The phrase "today's students" is used regularly throughout this report and should be interpreted as an updated way of referring to "nontraditional" students, who now comprise nearly half of students enrolled in higher education institutions. By the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (NCES; n.d.) definition, nontraditional students include anyone who falls into one or more of the following categories: delays enrollment; attends part time for at least part of the academic year; is financially independent; has dependents other than a spouse; is a single parent; does not have a high school diploma. The phrase "today's students" can also be considered an extension of the NCES definition, in that it is used as an umbrella term to capture the trends/changes in student characteristics and behavior more broadly.

Institutional barriers are incompatibilities of the system with the realities faced by adult students.

the sacrifices and adjustments made to accommodate education-related demands. Institutional barriers are incompatibilities of the system with the realities faced by adult students. For example, a college advising/counseling office that is open only from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Mondays through Fridays is virtually inaccessible for the adult learner living off campus and working full time during the traditional work week.

Policies requiring full-time enrollment and intensive on-campus participation tend to overlook the time constraints of adult learners taking night, weekend, or online coursework (Klein-Collins, 2011).

As student affairs professionals seek to improve educational equity and celebrate the life experiences of all students, they must intentionally design support systems with the distinct needs of adult learners in mind. This brief draws on national research findings, widely cited strategies for success, and existing literature to outline five things student affairs professionals should do to support adult learners.

1 Identify Promising Opportunities and Gaps in Service

To unearth underlying causes of concern and opportunities for improvement, student affairs professionals should conduct internal research and evaluation of existing institutional policies, practices, and processes as they relate to adult learner access and success. Self-assessment can help draw attention to the ways an institution has unintentionally neglected adult learners while also spotlighting areas of institutional strength.

The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL; n.d.a)—a thought leader in the adult student education space—offers an Adult Learner 360 tool[2], which is made up of two surveys. The Institutional Self-Assessment Survey measures faculty, administrator, and staff perceptions of the impact of resources, structures, and practices on adult learner success. The Adult Learner Inventory (ALI) identifies areas where an institution is or is not meeting adult student expectations (Wertheim, 2012).

Created through a partnership between CAEL and Ruffalo Noel Levitz, the ALI asks adult students to respond to expectation statements with an importance and a satisfaction rating on a scale of 1 to 7, with 7 being the highest (Ruffalo Noel Levitz, 2016). Figure 1 illustrates responses to a cluster of items in the Life and Career Planning scale, with items of strength noted in green and items of challenge noted in red. A performance gap reflects the difference between the satisfaction score and the importance score.

Student affairs professionals are continuously seeking to design new and innovative ways to support student success, and taking a critical look at the status quo can help refresh outdated practices. For example, in a NASPA–Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education online learning course module, "The Campus Climate for Adult Students," Leslie Laing and Heidi Watson (2014) offered three approaches to strengthening adult learner support: (a) Invite an outside consultant to evaluate current efforts and recommend strategies; (b) send teams to other institutions to identify best practices; and (c) appoint a cross-functional team to study adult learner theory and research, assess current efforts, and offer recommendations for improvement.

When replicating promising practices, it is important to first establish a clear understanding of the differences in institutional contexts (e.g., institution mission, culture, resources, student composition, local economy). Establishing sustainable and effective strategies may require extensive data collection and assessment on the needs of adult learner subpopulations at a particular institution. For example, the types of student services that benefit student veterans may look different than those beneficial for other subgroups of adult learners. An InsideTrack (2016) report on "posttraditional" students (defined as non-first-time, part-time students) found that military service member students value program convenience 28% more than nonmilitary students. The report also demonstrates differences between young adults and older adults among online learners. More than a quarter of respondents who were 24 years old or younger ranked "time management" as their top concern with online learning, compared with 37% and 45% of those ages 25–40 and 40 years and older, respectively (InsideTrack, 2016). These findings demonstrate the importance of disaggregating adult learner populations to tease out subgroup differences, and they also highlight the need to have ongoing feedback with adult learners to better understand their most pressing concerns and preferences.

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[2] Formerly named the Adult Learning Focused Institution Assessment Toolkit.

Figure 1. Sample ALI Responses: Life and Career Planning

Item	FOUR-YEAR INSTITUTIONS			COMMUNITY COLLEGES		
	Importance	Satisfaction	Gap	Importance	Satisfaction	Gap
Advisors are knowledgeable about requirements for courses and programs of interest to me.	91%	69%	22%	89%	65%	24%
Sufficient course offerings within my program of study are available each term.	90%	55%	35%	89%	54%	35%
This institution provides students with the help they need to develop an education plan.	87%	66%	21%	86%	64%	22%
I can receive credit for learning derived from my previous life and work experiences.	83%	51%	32%	79%	47%	32%
Mentors are available to guide my career and life goals.	75%	51%	24%	77%	54%	23%

Note. Reprinted from "2015–16 adult learners satisfaction-priorities report," by Ruffalo Noel Levitz, 2016, p. 6. Copyright © 2016 by Ruffalo Noel Levitz. Reprinted with permission.

2 Raise Institutional Awareness of the Experiences and Needs of Adult Learners

Educating institutional leaders and the higher education community about the realities of adult learners is key to challenging assumptions about what supports today's students need. Awareness of adult learner characteristics and circumstances should help professionals improve campus climate and better target new student success initiatives. Reimagining programs for today's students requires paying attention to the adult learner perspective, the unseen barriers they face, and the underutilized assets they bring. Promoting awareness of adult learners and elevating their voice across the institution helps foster a culture of inclusion, which may attract students who had previously attended college but felt isolated or that they lacked social supports. Research suggests that adult learners may experience a lack of self-confidence (Lin, 2016). Experiencing feelings of self-doubt in an unaccommodating campus environment may decrease chances of adult learner persistence.

Student affairs professionals should familiarize their institution with the profile of adult learners and try to increase their visibility on campus. Institutions can facilitate the representation of adult learners on university committees and other student decision-making bodies, as well as in online and hard-copy orientation materials showcasing a student body of diverse ages and life stages. For example, Rio Salado College, a small community college in Arizona, embeds adult learner photos and relevant resources into its annual student catalog (Rio Salado College, 2017). Visibility efforts can also include creating Federal Work-Study and other part- and full-time student campus employment opportunities that leverage the strengths of adult learners who have real-world experiences (Laing & Watson, 2014).

Replacing deficit-framing language with a recognition and celebration of adult learner successes

University of California, Berkeley

The University of California (UC), Berkeley, is among several public land–grant universities making early efforts to develop adult learner–focused initiatives. In 1988, Alice Jordan founded the Student Parent Center at the university. Jordan used data on the institution's students to build a culture of evidence and communicate the need to support student parents and other underserved student populations. Jordan strengthened her efforts through connections with the College of Education, which she partnered with to establish a reentry network for student parents. Due to Jordan's concerted case-making efforts, the center now provides a university-funded $8,000 annual scholarship to financial aid–qualifying student parents in addition to an array of services for a variety of adult learners. UC Berkeley offers family housing, drop-in crisis intervention, counseling, and three credit-bearing courses to assist student parents:

- Once Upon a University—A survival skills course that introduces student parents to the university and the resources available to them
- It Takes a Village—A course designed to build community and teach students how to successfully combine school, work, and family
- Beyond the Village—A course that addresses career and graduate school preparation and planning, offered in partnership with career services

UC Berkeley also offers several services tailored to student parents:

- Baby Bears @ Cal Project offers information, assistance, and peer support to student parents.
- Bear Necessities provides donated food and clothing to student parents.
- UC Berkeley offers service-learning internships specifically designed for student parents.

SPARR (the Student Parent Association for Recruitment and Retention) is a registered student group with funding from the UC Berkeley Student Government Association that provides a place for student parents to connect with one another and identify and advocate for their needs (UC Berkeley, n.d.).

Note. Reprinted from "The Campus Climate for Adult Students," by L. Laing and H. Watson, 2014 [Online course]. Copyright © 2014 by NASPA–Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education. Reprinted with permission.

helps illustrate the value that these students bring to an institution. For example, student affairs professionals should spotlight adult learner successes across the institution's website and alumni magazines (Laing & Watson, 2014). As a private, nonprofit institution with over 3,000 on-campus students and over 80,000 online students, Southern New Hampshire University (SNHU; 2017) is renowned for its innovations and support of adult learner populations. The SNHU website's homepage features testimonials from students and alumni who have a range of backgrounds and degree focuses. Student profiles include a working father and husband earning a Bachelor of Science degree in information technology, a veteran taking online courses in criminal justice, and an on-campus international student pursuing a master's degree (SNHU, 2017).

3 Develop and Maintain Internal and External Partnerships

The areas of support needed for the adult learner population are multifaceted and require cross-functional collaboration. The traditional model of individual institutions and functional offices of higher education working in silos and providing narrow access to information is unsustainable and could be detrimental to the success of today's students. Creating partnerships within and beyond the institution is key to ensuring efficient back-end processes and integrated learning systems that are mutually beneficial for the students, employers, and the community. For example, after identifying the prevalence of hunger among its students, Bunker Hill Community College (BHCC; n.d.) partnered with Food Link (n.d.) to offer a non-perishable food pantry stocked with unpurchased food from businesses in the area. BHCC, along with other institutions across the country, has engaged in internal and external partnerships to offer comprehensive social and financial resources centralized in a single location.

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Bridging the gap between academic and student affairs divisions is essential to aligning adult learners' learning experiences, backgrounds, and career interests. For example, accurately documenting and assessing learning that happens both inside and outside the classroom is an interdisciplinary effort of particular relevance for adult learners. In a joint effort with the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers, NASPA has worked to advance the use of comprehensive learner records (CLRs)—a system in which learning outcomes and competencies acquired from a range of student experiences are validated and documented (NASPA, n.d.).

Similar to the notion of the CLR, some institutions convert students' learning experiences gained outside traditional academic settings into college credits. Such prior-learning assessments (PLAs) recognize the value of skills gained from a range of experiences, which may include time spent volunteering as well as occupational and military training. According to a 2010 CAEL study, adult students from institutions that awarded them credit for prior learning had higher graduation and persistence rates than other adult students (Klein-Collins, 2010). Student affairs professionals should be highly involved in the design and management of CLRs, PLAs, or other cross-functional initiatives (e.g., integrated advising, early alert systems, blended occupational and academic curricula) that support the shifting needs of today's students.

In addition to nurturing partnerships with an array of internal constituencies, student affairs professionals should consider working with the community, employers, local government, peer institutions, and other external entities in support of adult learner success. Teaming up with state or local government agencies may enable an institution to offer subsidized public transportation, child care, or other social benefits for adult learners. Some community colleges have partnered with nonprofit organizations, such as the Center for Law and Social Policy (Duke-Benfield & Saunders, 2016) or Achieving the Dream (n.d.), to join networks of institutions interested in working alongside experts, sharing insights for overcoming common challenges, and better connecting adult learners with resources and services.

4 Minimize Perceived and Real Work–School–Family Conflicts

The success of adult learners hinges on a variety of factors, including the responsiveness of an institution to a student's attempts to balance life, work, and school. After analyzing a survey distributed to returning adult learners (i.e., those who had previously earned college credit but did not complete), Bergman, Gross, Berry, and Shuck (2014) found that institutional responsiveness and campus environments play a significant and positive role in student persistence and graduation. The study found that as students felt more strongly that their work and classes conflicted, their odds of persisting decreased by about 78%. In contrast, as students felt more strongly that the institution was responsive to their needs, their odds of persisting increased by about 63%. The researchers also found controlling for campus environments negated the significant effect of work–class conflict, which suggests that providing a supportive campus environment can mitigate the challenges of working and raising a family (Bergman et al., 2014). For example, the University of Washington (n.d.) helps create an environment supportive of new mothers by providing several private, secure, and clean lactation and changing stations in several buildings and offices across campus. Student affairs professionals can help positively impact adult learner success by ensuring policies and services are designed to support the lives of students with tight resources and competing priorities. Institutions should prevent the accumulation of microfrustrations by improving the system in such a way that the hardest things about college are those that are relevant and meaningful to learning—everything else should be easy (Rascoff & Johnson, 2016). Disjointed advising, inconvenient parking, limited course availability, and inaccessible child care are a few of several systemic barriers to adult learner success. Student affairs professionals should provide adult learners with individualized academic, financial, and career advising services. To ensure access

for all students, advising services should be available both virtually and in a physical, central location with flexible delivery options. The University of Akron's (n.d.) Adult Focus program, for example, offers preadmission advising for new adult and veteran students, evening advising office hours, and prompt information available both in person and online.

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Removing barriers to adult learner persistence also involves assisting with both expected and unexpected costs of attendance (Goldrick-Rab & Kendall, 2016). Financial challenges are especially pointed for low-income adult learners with child care, transportation, housing, and food expenses. The burden of high costs of attendance can be alleviated through emergency aid programs providing various forms of aid, such as campus vouchers, completion scholarships, emergency loans, food pantries, restricted grants, and unrestricted grants (Kruger, Parnell, & Wesaw, 2016). Being explicit about adult learner financial award eligibility will help encourage participation from the target population. Colorado State University, for example, offers an Osher Re-Entry Scholarship for adults who have at least a five-year gap in enrollment (Laing & Watson, 2014). Additionally, student affairs divisions can support on- or near-campus service fairs to connect adult learners to community resources such as child care, medical care, and social services (Laing & Watson, 2014). Student veterans would also benefit from information on veteran-specific

Ten Principles For Effectively Serving Adults

Outreach
Conducts its outreach to adult learners by overcoming barriers in time, place, and tradition in order to create lifelong access to educational opportunities.

Life & Career Planning
Addresses adult learners' life and career goals before or at the onset of enrollment in order to assess and align its capacities to help learners reach their goals.

Financing
Promotes choice using an array of payment options for adult learners in order to expand equity and financial flexibility.

Assessment of Learning Outcomes
Defines and assesses the knowledge, skills, and competencies acquired by adult learners—both from the curriculum and from life and work experience—in order to assign credit and confer degrees with rigor.

Teaching Learning Process
Faculty uses multiple methods of instruction (including experiential and problem-based methods) for adult learners in order to connect curricular concepts to useful knowledge and skills.

Student Support Systems
Assists adult learners using comprehensive academic and student support systems in order to enhance students' capacities to become self-directed, lifelong learners.

Technology
Uses technology to provide relevant and timely information and to enhance the learning experience.

Strategic Partnerships
Engages in strategic relationships, partnerships, and collaborations with employers and other organizations in order to develop and improve educational opportunities for adult learners.

Transitions
Supports guided pathways that lead into and from the institution's programs and services in order to ensure that students' learning will apply usefully to achieving their educational and career goals.

Adaptivity
Adjusts to shifting external market forces and is able to adapt to the changing expectations of internal stakeholders, students, and employers—understanding the needs of those they serve by developing creative academic solutions.

support groups—such as the American Legion Family Support Network, the National Association of American Veterans, and Operation Homefront—available on an institution's website.

5 Create Accessible and Relevant Engagement Pathways

Literature on adult learner engagement suggests that adults tend to use the classroom as the primary setting for developing relationships with peers and faculty (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011; Wyatt, 2011). Research from Wyatt (2011) suggests that adult learners are interested in participating in relevant activities and events outside of the classroom, but cite a lack of communication as the primary deterrent from engagement. Student affairs professionals should communicate information about family-friendly programs and events geared toward adult learner interests. Ensuring ample opportunity for dialogue and feedback from adult learners demonstrates that their voice matters and is critical to the design of engagement opportunities. Potential engagement opportunities specifically targeted to adult learners may include establishing a local chapter of the national honor society for adult learners, Alpha Sigma Alpha; hosting lunch-and-learn events where adult learners can meet with faculty; or creating a mentorship program that matches new and experienced adult learners (Laing & Watson, 2014).

Student affairs professionals should leverage technology to deliver engagement experiences to students who may not be able to physically participate on campus. In addition to broadcasting events online, institutions could use technology to facilitate adult learner virtual participation in student organization meetings and events. For example, the University of Maryland University College provides a digital networking tool—MIL-VET Checkpoint—to help provide information to students transitioning from the military to civilian life (Alvarez, 2017). Shifting cocurricular activity culture to include both in-person and online engagement will help expand activity accessibility and boost adult learner integration into the community.

This brief offers five recommendations that student affairs leaders should consider when developing new programs and strategies to advance adult learner success. Through a review of key opportunity areas, student affairs professionals can take steps toward fostering a deep sense of community and support for adult learners, in terms of institutional responsiveness and awareness of needs and lifestyles, relevant and applied learning structures, and targeted and accessible engagement efforts. The suggestions outlined are by no means comprehensive. Student affairs professionals must continue to take flexible approaches and tailor strategies to what works best for their institution and student population. Investment in robust data collection and program evaluation efforts will help institutions better understand the depth and breadth of adult learner experiences and identify effective practices. While creating and nurturing partnerships enables comprehensive program and service delivery, joining networks also facilitates in the sharing of information and resources otherwise inaccessible for a single institution and/or division. In order to best support today's students, student affairs professionals must seek to evolve practices and understand the distinct responsibilities, priorities, and preferences of adult learners.

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Through high-quality professional development, strong policy advocacy, and substantive research to inform practice, NASPA meets the diverse needs and invests in realizing the potential of all its members under the guiding principles of integrity, innovation, inclusion, and inquiry. NASPA members serve a variety of functions and roles, including the vice president and dean for student life, as well as professionals working within housing and residence life, student unions, student activities, counseling, career development, orientation, enrollment management, racial and ethnic minority support services, and retention and assessment.