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MAKING THE MOST OF ADULT STUDENTS ON YOUR CAMPUS

HIGHER ED IMPACT

MONTHLY**DIAGNOSTIC**

October 2011

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A LETTER FROM AMIT MRIG
PRESIDENT, ACADEMIC IMPRESSIONS

Most college and university administrators know the story of how demographics are shifting in this country. They don't need the latest data from NCES — they see it every day on their campuses. Nontraditional students now make up a significant majority of college enrollment.

But many institutions, especially regionally focused public and private four-years, did not make the decision to intentionally serve this market. They are reacting to the demand as opposed to being out in front of it.

Adult students have different experiences, expectations, and educational goals than traditional-age students. Institutions that successfully serve this market have retooled enrollment policies, course offerings, and student support services, and have even begun thinking of ways to earn their support as alumni.

That's why we've gathered a host of experts from across the institution to help you better meet the demands of this growing population. We hope their advice will be useful to you.

MONTHLY DIAGNOSTIC ONLINE

Download this PDF and read this issue's articles online:
http://www.academicimpressions.com/monthly_diagnostic.php?i=210

AI Contributors

Amit Mrig
PRESIDENT, ACADEMIC IMPRESSIONS

Amit co-founded Academic Impressions in 2002 to provide a variety of educational products and services that help higher education administrators tackle key, strategic challenges. Since 2002, AI has designed and directed hundreds of conferences and has served representatives from over 3,500 higher education institutions. Besides designing and leading events for cabinet-level officers focused on strategic planning, budgeting, and leadership development, Amit leads Academic Impressions' ongoing research into the five- and 10 year challenges facing higher education and plays a lead role in outlining each issue of Higher Ed Impact: Monthly Diagnostic to highlight how college and university leaders can take an institution-wide approach to answering those challenges.

Daniel Fusch
DIRECTOR OF RESEARCH AND PUBLICATIONS, ACADEMIC IMPRESSIONS

At Academic Impressions, Daniel provides strategic direction and content for AI's electronic publication *Higher Ed Impact*, including market research and interviews with leading subject matter experts on critical issues. Since the publication's launch in 2009, Daniel has written more than 150 articles on strategic issues ranging from student recruitment and retention to development and capital planning. Daniel previously served as a conference director for Academic Impressions, developing training programs focused on issues related to campus sustainability, capital planning, and facilities management. Prior to joining Academic Impressions, Daniel served as adjunct faculty for the University of Denver. Daniel holds a Ph.D. in English.

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Marla oversees and directs AI's programs and services for student affairs professionals. Her main areas of research are outcomes-based assessment, retention, leadership in student affairs, and topics related to career service offices. Previously, she worked in career services and college counseling at a variety of campuses. Marla earned an MA in clinical psychology from The University of Texas at El Paso and a BA in psychology from Miami University (Ohio). Marla's favorite parts of the conference director role are building relationships with practitioners and learning about the amazing work they are doing.

Contributors

Mike Barzacchini
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Mike has worked in marketing communication and public relations for more than 20 years. Currently, he directs the marketing department for Harper College, a large, metropolitan community college outside of Chicago. He developed the college's first branding campaign and leads the institution's integrated marketing, Web, and social media initiatives.

Charles Cushman
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Recently, Charles taught at the George Washington University for 12 years, directing two master's programs: Legislative Affairs (2001-06), and Political Management (2006-11); and was acting director of the Graduate School of Political Management. In his role as acting director, Chuck oversaw the modularized degree curriculum in the College of Professional Studies. Charles has taught courses on politics and public policy, national security policymaking, and Congress's roles in defense policy, and has lectured in Latin America on US politics and government structure. He is the author of *An Introduction to the US Congress*. He has provided foreign and defense policy analysis to many news outlets, including the BBC, CBC, the Voice of America, Al-Jazeera, and CNN. He did his graduate training at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where he completed a Ph.D. in American Politics. He is a graduate of West Point and served nine years in the US Army as an Armor officer, commanding troops in Germany and at Fort Knox, KY.

Janet Daniel
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Janet has spent more than 25 years in teaching, program development, and educational leadership at the university and community college levels. During her career in higher education, she has developed seminars, written course curriculum, and directed student services programs. To support the academic and career goals of students, she has taught courses, authored and co-authored national and local grants, and secured scholarship funding through private donors and public organizations. She is a founding leader of the Association for Non-Traditional Students in Higher Education, and is active in national and regional professional organizations.

Donald Fellows
PRESIDENT AND CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER,
MARTS & LUNDY

Don joined Marts & Lundy as a senior consultant in 2000, bringing more than 20 years of fundraising experience in higher education to the firm. He was elected president and chief executive officer in 2006 after serving as a managing director since 2004. Prior to joining Marts & Lundy, he served as director of development at the University of San Diego and, from 1985 to 1990, he was associate director of development and director of corporate and foundation relations at the Stanford Business School where he was primarily responsible for seeking major gifts in support of the school's operating and capital needs as part of Stanford's $1.1 billion "Centennial Campaign." He currently serves as a director of the Giving Institute and the Giving USA Foundation.

Denise Hart
DIRECTOR OF ADULT EDUCATION AND THE SUCCESS PROGRAM,
PROFESSOR OF EDUCATION, FAIRLEIGH DICKINSON UNIVERSITY

Denise has spent more than thirty years in higher education. Twenty years ago she created the baccalaureate adult learner program, Success, at Fairleigh Dickinson University (FDU) and she still administers that program, teaching and advising undergraduate adult students. Denise oversees all aspects of FDU's assessment of experiential learning and serves as a resource to the wider university community on issues affecting the adult learner. In 2009, she authored (with Dr. Jerry Hickerson of WSSU) the CAEL publication, *Prior Learning Portfolios: A Representative Collection* (Dubuque, IA: Kendall Hunt).

Robert A. Sevier
PH.D., SENIOR VICE PRESIDENT, STRATEGY, STAMATS INC.

With more than 25 years of leadership experience in strategic thinking and planning, integrated and brand marketing, market research, and student recruiting, Bob's innovative work has been featured at hundreds of professional conferences, as well as in higher education's major marketing publications, including *Currents, Journal of College Admissions, Admissions Strategist, University Business, and College & University*. He has authored seven books on integrated marketing, brand marketing, innovation, and strategic planning. Prior to joining Stamats in 1988, Bob taught and worked as an administrator at The Ohio State University, Denison University, Mount Vernon Nazarene University, and Oregon Health Sciences University.

CONTENTS

Making the Most of Adult Students on Your Campus

THE CHANGING STUDENT DEMOGRAPHIC: WHAT YOU NEED TO RETHINK

Increasingly, academic leaders are becoming aware that the traditional, 18-year-old high school graduate enrolling as a freshman at a four-year institution is a shrinking demographic. According to data from the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES):

- Three fourths of today's college students are nontraditional
- 49 percent are enrolled part-time
- 38 percent work full-time
- 27 percent have dependents of their own at home

These adult learners interact with your institution – from admission to commencement and beyond – in ways markedly different from traditional students. A diverse, heterogeneous demographic, adult students comprise working mothers, career-aged adults seeking a career change or a safe harbor amid a troubled economy, military veterans, and adults of all ages returning to complete a degree. These nontraditional learners are often both hard-working and determined. Unless compensated by an employer, most are paying for their tuition out of their own pocket, and many are allocating time to their education that could be devoted to family, commitments within their community, or other career-building activities.

In other words, it's likely that most adult students enrolling at your institution have the will to achieve and the will to complete a degree. Yet many unintentional barriers persist to a positive student experience at your

institution – barriers that represent a series of missed opportunities as this population grows. Projects such as *USA Today's* Take America to College (2010), which offers video recordings of nontraditional students describing their challenges, demonstrate how many adult students face difficulties in finding courses, advisers, and faculty that are attuned to their learning styles and schedules – and must wrestle with curriculum design and academic policies and procedures that were not designed with the needs of adult learners in mind.

Adult students don't just learn differently, they go to school differently.

Charles Cushman, Georgetown University

A WHOLE-CAMPUS APPROACH: FROM REACTIVE TO PROACTIVE

Many institutions serve adult students in a largely reactive mode. Recognizing that there are barriers to enrolling, retaining, and graduating adult students, a growing number of colleges have adopted some scattered programming to aid adult learners (such as piloting a prior learning assessment, offering a veterans center, or adding resources in the career services center dedicated to the needs of adult students). Fewer institutions have committed to a more holistic and intentional strategy for recruiting, educating, retaining, and building affinity with adult learners. In the absence of such a strategy,

you risk under-serving and under-utilizing this rapidly growing nontraditional student population.

In this issue of *Higher Ed Impact: Monthly Diagnostic*, we have interviewed a variety of experts from marketing, curriculum design, academic advising, advancement, and other functions to get a big-picture look at how institutions can make the most of adult students on their campuses. We will walk you through the following key components of a holistic strategy.

ADOPTING A MORE FLEXIBLE APPROACH TO YOUR CURRICULUM

Your institution's efforts to both attract and retain the growing population of adult students have to begin at the curricular level. No amount of investment in marketing or student support will make up for a curriculum and an academic calendar that does not meet adult learner needs. For example,

many working adults may be able to take only one or two courses per term. They may well be determined to complete their degree, but it is likely to take them longer than it will take many traditional students. Others may have the means and the dedication to accelerate their progress, or may be enrolling having already received advanced training that they will wish to apply toward their degree. Institutions leading in this area have found economical and academically rigorous models for offering working students a high degree of flexibility.

This issue will offer practical strategies for adapting the curriculum to adult learners from Charles B. Cushman, Jr., currently a senior fellow at the Government Affairs Institute at Georgetown University, and Denise Hart, the director of adult education and creator of the Success Program at Fairleigh Dickinson University.

RECRUITING AND ADMITTING ADULT STUDENTS

Adult students approach your institution with high expectations for clear, efficient communication and customer service; yet too often, they are confronted with an admissions process tailored not to their needs but to those of high school graduates. Many prospective adult students will lose both interest and trust in your institution's readiness to serve them if they can't easily find the information they most need on your website, or if they are routed through different offices without having their most pressing questions addressed. Also, applicants who have not attended college for some time and are now returning may be unfamiliar with the admissions and financial aid process generally.

Making your institution competitive in recruiting and enrolling adult students will require a thorough rethinking of how you communicate with them at each stage of the admissions funnel. We've tapped the expertise of adult-recruiting veteran Mike Barzacchini, director of marketing services for Harper College, to offer perspective on what practices work.

BOOSTING THE PERSISTENCE OF YOUR ADULT STUDENTS

Many adult students face competing demands on their time (such as family, a full-time job, or military service) and lack immediate access to a peer group. Additionally, student services, from campus life to counseling, are more often attuned to the needs of traditional undergraduates than working adults. To note one logistical example, working professionals often cannot see faculty during afternoon office hours; similarly, student services, financial aid, the registrar, and

even the campus bookstore will likely be closed to them if these offices are only available during business hours. This means that one of your most "at-risk" populations may have limited access to help when they are most in need of it.

As you enroll more adult students, it will be crucial to coordinate cross-departmental efforts to support adult learners, employ advisers who are able to work collaboratively with adults to develop their learning plans, and develop intentional orientations, seminars, and peer mentoring opportunities for adult learners. Janet Daniel, director of the office of adult students and evening services at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, offers some practical tips for moving forward.

CULTIVATING AFFINITY AMONG ADULT STUDENTS AND ALUMNI

Institutional leaders have been paying increased attention to student philanthropy, recognizing that in an environment of diminished state funds and more restricted donor support, it will be critical to adopt a long-term strategy for building the donor pipeline by engaging future alumni while they are still students and while your institution has its best opportunities to build affinity. As the percentage of the student body that is nontraditional grows, leading institutions will need to develop plans for building affinity with this population.

There are significant barriers to doing this. The relationships adult students build with their institutions are usually very transactional, and because so many adult students pay tuition out of their own pocket, they may have little awareness over the importance of philanthropy to the institution or its relevance to the education they have received. Approaches that work with traditional students and alumni are less likely to work with the adult demographic. We've interviewed key thinker Don Fellows, president and CEO of Marts and Lundy, for advice on cultivating affinity with these students.

DIFFERENTIATING YOUR SCHOOL FOR ADULT STUDENTS

ONLINE :: 1:00 - 2:30 P.M. EST :: DECEMBER 1, 2011

SUPPORTING ADULT STUDENTS ACROSS CAMPUS

ONLINE :: 1:00 - 2:30 P.M. EST :: DECEMBER 16, 2011

CREATING A STOP-OUT PROGRAM ON YOUR CAMPUS

ONLINE :: 1:00 - 2:30 P.M. EST :: JANUARY 12, 2012

OFFERING A MORE FLEXIBLE CURRICULUM

Your efforts to both attract and retain the growing population of adult students have to begin at the curricular level. No amount of investment in marketing or student support will make up for a curriculum and an academic calendar that does not meet adult learner needs.

When asked about key influencing factors on college choice for adult students, Bob Sevier, senior vice president of strategy at STAMATS, notes: "If there's one thing you need to stress, it's flexibility."

It's key to understand that adult students have more demands on their time. Sevier suggests that adult students are also more likely than traditional students to perceive their college education as a means to an end. "For many traditional students, the campus experience and the process of gaining education is an event, a rite of passage. For adult learners, it is more likely a step to getting something else – a better degree, a better job." Adult students are likely to be focused on that end outcome and will search for the quickest and most convenient way to get to it.

The flexibility that attracts adult students includes:

- Courses offered at different times (evenings, weekends)
- Accelerated programming
- Prior learning assessment

For adult students who have competing commitments on their time (career, family, etc.), the absence of this type of flexibility isn't merely an inconvenience; for many, it's a barrier to enrolling at your institution. To learn more about putting this flexibility into practice, we turned to Charles B. Cushman, Jr., currently a Senior Fellow at the Government Affairs Institute at Georgetown University, and recently the acting director for the Graduate School of Political Management's College of Professional Studies at the George Washington University. Here is Cushman's advice.

FLEXIBLE COURSE SCHEDULING

"Courses offered on evenings and weekends are absolutely necessary for serving adults," Cushman notes, but just offering evening courses may not be enough. Adult students' extracurricular commitments – such as a part-time or full-time job – may make the traditional regularity of the course schedule problematic. Cushman suggests:

- Rather than assuming that regularity (a course every Tuesday evening) is ideal, offer some sessions of the course at different times (such as every other weekend) so that adult learners who are unable to attend the regular time each week have an additional option
- Invest in hybrid course design to offer a "meet in the middle" approach for adult learners who can only get away from work some of the time
- Offer adults as much "lead time as humanly possible" – make sure the syllabus is available well in advance of the first day of the class, so that adult students have time to make accommodations in their work schedule

Cushman notes that there are several obstacles to flexible scheduling that need to be addressed. First, does the software your institution uses to schedule classrooms allow you the flexibility? If your automated system does not easily allow for scheduling courses to meet on some week days and some weekend days, then your faculty may need to request that by hand – which will likely mean being assigned less-than-optimal space late in the space allocation process.

But Cushman also suggests that addressing the issue of flexibility for adult learners opens up an important opportunity for a broader discussion around how the institution schedules space: "Our basic teaching model focuses on contact hours, face-time, seat time. But is that how good teaching actually happens? A skills-intensive course or a course using a simulation to teach may benefit from a model other than 14 regularly scheduled lessons. Maybe that course needs just 10 lessons, and the rest of the time is devoted to a weekend retreat where students do the learning simulation in real time. We have to be open to different ways of teaching."

ACCELERATED PROGRAMMING

A number of institutions have begun offering accelerated programming for nontraditional students. In the most frequent model, the time taken to cover course content is compressed into a smaller number of weeks that each contain a higher number of class sessions.

Cushman notes one important consideration: as you ramp up the number of accelerated courses your institution offers, it will be critical to determine how you will quantify

the teaching credit for that course for the faculty. "For example, if an accelerated course only takes six weeks to complete," Cushman asks, "does that count as one course when determining teaching loads and during faculty evaluation? Your faculty may be completing a course's worth of work compressed into a few weeks … and that has to be accounted for. On the calendar, it may not look like they taught a full course. But when you review the syllabus, the reading assignments, and the number of graded assignments, it may well be a full course's worth of workload for the faculty."

PRIOR LEARNING ASSESSMENT

Many adult learners return to college from the work force having received extensive corporate training, certification, or hands-on expertise in particular areas. Cushman suggests: "Make sure your institution has a mechanism for addressing prior learning
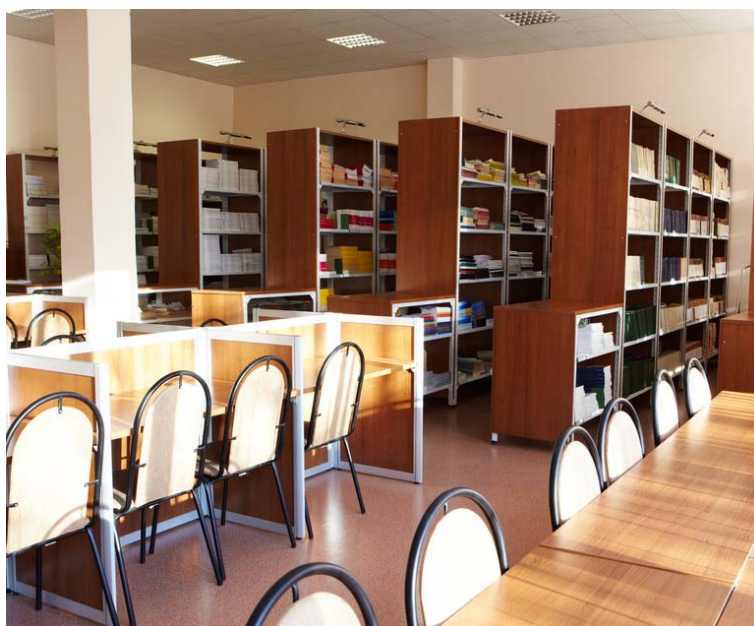
assessment. Not everyone needs to start at the start line. How do you get people started deeper in, when appropriate?"

According to Denise Hart, the director of adult education and creator of the Success Program at Fairleigh Dickinson University, the key to putting in place academically rigorous prior learning assessment is to focus on offering structured options for students to demonstrate specific skills or a knowledge base that they have learned outside of an academic institution. "This isn't about giving credit for 'life experience'," Hart notes. "You need to assign credit for demonstrated learning."

You may, for example, have a media technology student who worked for a decade for a major television network and is now returning to school for a further degree, or a hospital corpsman recently discharged from the navy who wants to pursue his pre-med; he likely took coursework in anatomy and physiology in the military, and is probably already performing many of the tasks a med tech would perform in a hospital. A portfolio assessment that requires these students to demonstrate their prior learning can help to reduce the number of credit hours they need to take, improving their persistence and their sense of momentum.

Providing credit for experiential learning often makes the bridge to the next degree for an adult learner. By accelerating these students, you are helping them move right along to graduation or into graduate education. And you are increasing the student's satisfaction. You are creating an advocate for your institution.

Denise Hart, Fairleigh Dickinson U

REVIEW BEST PRACTICES IN PRIOR LEARNING ASSESSMENT

Techniques for Assessing Prior Learning (January 2010)

PLA: Outreach to Faculty (March 2010)

FOR GRADUATE STUDENTS: STACKABLE CREDENTIALS

Cushman also notes a model developed at The George Washington University that offers a unique approach to credentialing graduate students. The model was devised as the institution identified growing markets of working professionals who are interested in returning to postsecondary education to develop very specific skill sets. Many of these professionals were already enrolling in search of potential courses; GW identified an untapped opportunity.

Cushman describes the model in this way: "A master's degree can be conceived of as one big degree, or as a set of nested certificates." For example:

- You could offer two certificates of 6-7 courses each; together, the certificates "stack" into one master's degree
- You could offer the core courses of a graduate program as one certificate, and then add three shorter certificate programs that each address a specific skill area

The George Washington University offers the second of these two options for its paralegal program; the shorter certificates include international law and intellectual property law. Each of these are specific sub-fields in which a paralegal may wish to develop expertise. "If I am a senior paralegal," Cushman notes, "I may not need a master's degree because I'm already in the business, but if I *do* need experience in intellectual property law, I can go get that certificate and complete the program in six months. If I am a junior paralegal and I want my degree,
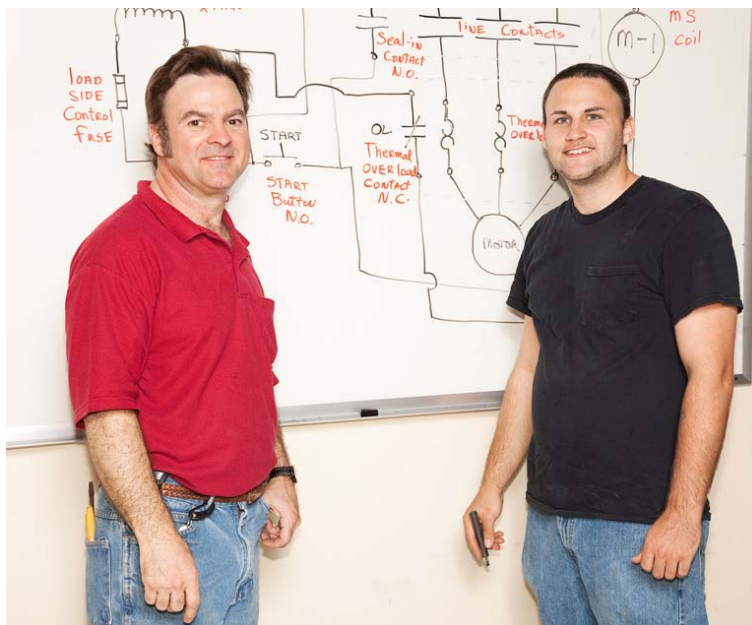
I can take each certificate and eventually complete the entire degree program – and along the way, I will have certifications to show my supervisors at work that I am making progress in the program."

As this example demonstrates, working professionals returning for graduate-level work may have a variety of goals in mind. An outside-the-box "stackable credentials" approach allows your institution to serve these diverse audiences and meet their learning needs.

DIFFERENTIATING YOUR SCHOOL FOR ADULT STUDENTS

1:00 - 2:30 p.m. EST :: December 1, 2011

Join us online at to learn how schools that serve adult students can differentiate themselves from competitors.

RECRUITING AND ADMITTING ADULT STUDENTS

Because enrollment policies and practices have long been tailored to traditional-aged students (especially at four-year institutions), efforts to recruit and enroll adults offer special challenges. To learn more about key actions at each stage of the admissions funnel that can have an impact on the enrollment of adult students, we reached out to adult-recruiting veteran Mike Barzacchini, director of marketing services for Harper College, who has seen considerable success in this area. Here are his practical tips for increasing inquiries, applications, and admits.

INCREASING INQUIRIES FROM ADULTS

First, Barzacchini suggests a two-pronged approach to generating leads:

- Mine your historical data to identify past stop-outs and other cohorts that have shown interest in a degree at your institution
- Create an adult-friendly website

RE-ENROLLING STOPOUTS

Stop-outs are those who did not attain their degree – not for reasons of low academic performance, but because of the intervention of life circumstances. An audit of your records can tell you which past students stopped a few classes shy of a degree. Many of these students may not even realize how close they would be to completing if they were to re-enroll. For more information, read our July 2010 article "Re-enrolling Stop-Outs: Overcoming the Barriers."

Besides stop-outs, Barzacchini advises also mining your database for prior inquiries and prior applicants. Find out who has shown interest in your institution in the past but may not have received the follow-up needed at the time.

Beyond mining your data, rethinking the way your website reaches out to adults can be key to generating more leads from this demographic. Traditional university websites

often leave adults bewildered and unable to locate easily the information they want most: where and how to complete an application, what programs of interest are available, what financial aid may be available, and what the experience of other adults has been like at the institution.

Barzacchini suggests scaling your website effort in approximately three phases:

Phase 1

Offer a landing page for adults that walks them through the application process in quick, easy steps and includes only the information they most need. The key in appealing to adults and assisting them in connecting with your institution is to make the landing page task-focused. Barzacchini suggests that the landing page include, prominently:

- How to request more information
- How to complete an application
- How to complete a FAFSA
- An online copy of your information session, with testimonials from adult students that answer frequently asked questions and relay critical information.

Adults want to hear from other adult students, Barzacchini suggests. Posting online videos interviewing adult learners at your institution can be an inexpensive and effective way to make that connection. To learn more, read our article "Marketing with Online Video" or check out this example from Harper College.

Phase 2

Phase 1 offered the basic content an adult learner needs in order to get started. A good next step, Barzacchini suggests, but one that requires more resources, involves adding an online live chat feature. When an admissions

officer can reply to inquiries or questions in real time, this responsiveness is attractive to adults; it conveys that the institution is responsive and committed to them. Online chat can be a key tool for boosting conversion from inquiry to applicant, or from applicant to enroll.

Phase 3

If your office is ready to ramp up further, offer an online adult viewbook that is dynamic, with live chat integrated into each page – allowing prospective adult applicants to ask questions as they review the information.

IS YOUR WEBSITE MOBILE-FRIENDLY?

As more career-aged adults return to campus (or look to enroll in online courses), it is increasingly likely that many prospective applicants will visit your website from a smartphone. In June 2011, we interviewed Bob Johnson, president of Bob Johnson Consulting, LLC, for "Five Tips for Making Your Website Mobile-Friendly."

INCREASING ADULT APPLICANTS

"Try to lead adults to an experience with your institution," Barzacchini suggests – whether the experience is a monthly information session, a large event such as an open house, a one-on-one conversation online or over the phone, a campus tour, or a career fair. Offering adults multiple touchpoints is key. Adult learners have many other commitments competing with their interest in a return to school; some may have an extended information-gathering stage prior to applying.

We see repeat attendees at different monthly information sessions, as they think through their decision. In some cases, it can be 3-6 semesters between an adult's first attendance of an information session and matriculation – data that shows the necessity of both multiple touchpoints. It's critical to both offer and advertise opportunities for them to ask questions and learn about the institution, and develop a follow-up plan for converting leads to applied students.

Mike Barzacchini, Harper College

An information session can be your best opportunity to remove barriers to enrollment – not just by relaying critical information, but by providing hands-on assistance for adults who make the decision to apply. Here are some best practices recommended by Barzacchini:

- Provide stations where adults can complete their applications or FAFSA during or immediately after the session
- Waive the application fee for adults who apply that day
- Have staff available to walk them through the process and assist with their application
- If possible, have bilingual staff present to assist Spanish speakers
- As you are likely to have more adults RSVP than actually show (some adults may have had to work late; or perhaps a babysitter canceled that evening), follow up with those who don't show and offer them an easy way to get the information they missed (such as a link to an online version of the information session)

"Offer a simple, direct pathway to enrollment," Barzacchini advises. "Simple, direct instructions for each step. Give checklists. Remove barriers and red tape."

INCREASING ADULT ADMITS

Finally, Barzacchini draws attention to two things needed to move an adult from application to matriculation:

- Personal contact
- Referral to the right resources on campus, efficiently and quickly

Generally, adult students value responsiveness and a high degree of service. Many may be unfamiliar with the protocols and organizational structure of a college or university, and will expect assistance in navigating it. It's important to provide adults with a designated point of contact, a staff member with the admissions office who has a significant portion of his or her time dedicated to assisting adults and routing them to the offices or resources they need, and whose performance is evaluated in part based on adult enrollment. This will be key both to improving yield on admits, and to setting new adult students up, from the start, for academic success and persistence – by removing barriers and points of confusion at the start of their first term.

> **CREATING A STOP-OUT PROGRAM ON YOUR CAMPUS**
>
> 1:00 - 2:30 p.m. EST :: January 12, 2012
>
> Join us online to learn the key components of successful stop-out programs and review two institutional case studies.

BOOSTING ADULT PERSISTENCE

Beyond offering flexible course scheduling, what are the real keys to persistence and academic success for adult learners? Janet Daniel, director of the office of adult students and evening services at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, distills the current research into three key points that, when present, make a difference:

- A central unit on campus to coordinate cross-departmental efforts to support adult learners, and which serves as a single, "one stop" point of contact for adult students
- An intentionally designed orientation to help adults transition back into the college experience
- Academic advisers (and faculty) who understand adult learners' unique needs
- Extended office hours for key services and a campus-wide emphasis on availability and convenience

A COORDINATED APPROACH, WITH ONE POINT OF CONTACT

Many campuses have particular services and staff that are equipped to help address the needs of adult learners, but they are seldom coordinated. Daniel speaks to the importance of a "one stop" approach to offering services for adult learners. Many adult learners are either first-generation students or have been removed from the college experience for enough years that they are not familiar with what offices to contact and when, or where to go to locate critical campus resources. Adopt a "one stop" approach by appointing one staff member or one office that is trained to listen to an adult learner's inquiries and direct them to the necessary personnel or services.

"Establishing a central unit," Daniel adds, "also communicates to adult students that the institution cares about their needs, that they have a place on campus, and that there is service and support available for them. It is an oasis office."

Ideally, this unit would include:

- Access to well-trained academic advisers who understand the policies, curriculum, and academic procedures of the institution and are able to plan "on the fly" with students
- A drop-off service – allow adult students to drop off request forms and offer to secure the necessary signatures within two days; "rather than have them deal with the frustration of being redirected from office to office," Daniel suggests, "we can take that form right to where it belongs"
- High visibility – Daniel recommends publicizing the office's existence through the admissions website, through the admissions office at the time of admission, and through the registrar's office at time of re-admission; it's also important to think strategically about the space this office will occupy – a basement office may not communicate to adult students that the institution values them

Additionally, this unit can assist in organizing a peer mentoring group for adult students, a nontraditional student organization, and with identifying financial support for adult learners. Daniel notes that most adult students don't realize that they may be eligible for scholarships, and that helping them find funds to apply for can remove one of the most significant barriers to persistence.

AN ORIENTATION FOR ADULT LEARNERS

Daniel also recommends holding intentional orientation programs for adult learners. These programs should focus on:

- Connecting adult students with their key point of contact on campus, with advisers, and with support services
- Helping them plan a schedule
- Showing them what technology they will need to register, and how to use it

Timing and duration are critical: "Adult students place a high value on their time, and you want to communicate that you value their time, too." In addition to the main orientation, Daniel has recently piloted two subsequent "getting-started" seminars during the summer. These are evening seminars that last for one hour, and if a student is unable to attend the first one (or desires a refresher), they can attend the second.

Finally, consider offering focused, supplemental one-hour workshops on topics such as information literacy and scholarship options.

ADULT-FRIENDLY ADVISING

Denise Hart, the director of adult education and creator of the Success Program at Fairleigh Dickinson University, notes two essentials to providing effective advising to adult learners:

- Ensuring you have advisers who are well-trained and equipped to connect adult (not just traditional) learners with the resources they need
- Adopting an "appreciative advising" or similar model, selecting and training advisers not just to provide overviews of a curriculum but to engage in active dialogue with adult learners about their aspirations and limitations in order to aid them in assessing various pathways to their chosen field

For example, Hart advises that it's critical that the advisers assigned to adult learners are knowledgeable about the array of credentials that an adult learner may come

to the institution with (or may be seeking). If your institution enrolls many military or veteran students, you will want an adviser who has a military background and is familiar with both the training received in the military and the challenges military students face on campus.

she still has access to it, and will want to know what evening, weekend, and online options you have available.

"Allow for self-paced scheduling, and be flexible," Vehrkens advises. "Good advising means responding to the individual needs of the student and helping them see the light at the end of the tunnel."

SPECIFIC TIPS FOR ADVISING ADULT LEARNERS

Removing the Barriers to Adult Learner Success (May 2010)

Kenneth Vehrkens, dean of the Petrocelli College of Continuing Studies and associate vice president for lifelong learning at Fairleigh Dickinson University, adds that it is critical for advisers of adult learners to work with them early to develop a "blueprint" for their course plan that emphasizes both outcomes and flexibility. Because of their work and family commitments, some of your adult learners may be able to register only for certain terms in the year – and their scheduling needs may change with little notice.

For example, one student may need to reduce credit hours or skip a term unexpectedly because of a change of employment or because they find they have hit their company's ceiling for tuition reimbursement. To encourage retention, help them cut through the red tape; they will need to be able to "stop out" and return for a future term without having to complete a lot of forms or take a leave of absence and then re-admit. Another student who is approaching an early retirement may want to accelerate her schedule in order to take advantage of tuition reimbursement while

ADULT-FRIENDLY FACULTY

When designing an educational plan for the returning adult, you need to help them have a positive experience right at the beginning. When someone has been away from college for years and is now coming back, that's a difficult transition. Selection of their first course is important.

Kenneth Vehrkens, Fairleigh Dickinson U

To encourage the academic success and persistence of adult learners, Vehrkens recommends that academic advisers connect adult learners with adult-friendly faculty during their first term. These are faculty who understand adult students' situations, needs, and perspectives. Have advisers work closely with your faculty:

- Offer faculty workshops to dispel myths about returning adults and to educate faculty about adult learners' motivations and challenges around balancing coursework, employment, and family commitments
- Have advisers review student evaluations with faculty periodically, offering constructive feedback and engaging faculty in discussion of what was successful and what wasn't in teaching and supporting the adult learners in their classes

"Build a core of faculty members who want adult learners in their classes and understand the challenges adults face," Vehrkens advises, "and who can share their enthusiasm with other faculty."

AUDIT YOUR CAMPUS SERVICES: FOCUS ON AVAILABILITY AND CONVENIENCE

Finally, beyond ensuring that you have a coordinated approach to advising and supporting adult learners, a true, student-centered investment to serving adult learners needs to include an audit of all campus services. For adult students, time is at a premium – they are already carving out time for their studies from a calendar weighted with other high-priority commitments. If your services are structured or offered in such a way as to make further demands on students' time, this will only place further strain on their studies.

Interview your current adult students and find out where they find campus services lacking, and interview incoming students to learn what questions they have about the services available on your campus. Incoming students are likely to ask questions such as:

- Is there a place for me to park near my classes?
- Is there safe child care available?
- Can I cash a check while on campus?
- Is the bookstore open at night?

SUPPORTING ADULT STUDENTS ACROSS CAMPUS

1:00 - 2:30 p.m. EST :: December 16, 2011

Join us to learn steps you can take to identify and better utilize existing resources in ways that support adult learners.

BUILDING AFFINITY AND PLANTING THE SEEDS FOR GIVING

Because adult students represent a growing demographic and one largely untapped in terms of the donor pipeline, advancement shops with a long-term view need to act now to begin planning how to move alumni who were adult students into the pipeline. For advice on how to start, we turned to Don Fellows, president and CEO of Marts and Lundy; Fellows' clients include institutions that have seen early gains in building affinity with nontraditional students and alumni.

"There are real challenges here," Fellows acknowledges. "Adult students often hold full-time jobs and have families; their time is at a premium and their encounter with the institution tends to be a more transactional experience. They come prepared, they pay money out of their own pockets for tuition, and they have their eyes set on the outcome. It's a different experience than the traditional student's. You will need to really invest in getting to know this population well."

Here is Fellows' advice.

TWO OBSTACLES TO OVERCOME

Fellows suggests two common obstacles to cultivating affinity with adults.

First, "because they paid out of pocket, they have a high appreciation for what they received, but they also feel that they have already paid for it." Student philanthropy messages that target adult learners – if introduced from day one of the student experience – will be especially crucial in inviting adults enter into a relationship with the institution that is more than just transactional. It will be important to emphasize both:

- How your institution hopes to support them both while they are enrolled and after graduation
- The extent to which philanthropy supplies the resources they have access to (that endowed professorship, that smart classroom, etc.); draw attention to the limits of tuition and to specific resources that were funded through donor support

Second, Fellows notes that this older population often expects a higher level of customer service, and they bring to the institution the same expectations they bring to other service providers. "Adults have a different level of expectation and an awareness that they are paying dearly for this education. If they are treated badly when trying to buy books, or when being billed, they are likely to have a more negative perception of the experience than a traditional, college-aged student would."

Whether through surveys, focus groups, or other means of inquiry, Fellows suggests gathering research on your adult students and alumni to get a sense of what their relationship with the institution is really like, where you can improve the experience for them, and what services and communications they would value. "Don't just guess," Fellows advises. "Ask what career services would be meaningful to mid-career or career-transitioning graduates. Find out how your institution can do more to connect with them and help them be successful."

SOME KEY SUGGESTIONS

Fellows offered to share his observations on what works and what doesn't in cultivating adult affinity – but with the caveat that no amount of expert advice makes up for not having inquired into the specific needs and experiences of your student body.

Here are Fellows' suggestions:

- Adults often come to a degree program primed for networking – they want to be connected with their peers, and they also value having a community of other adult learners with whom to share information. "Returning to college can be a grueling experience for them," Fellows notes. "The more you can do to foster peer mentoring and peer networking among your adult students, the better their connection with your institution will be."

- Adults are likeliest to forge connections with particular faculty members; when reaching out to recent alumni, faculty are likely to be more influential in making a connection than the institution's president or advancement officers.
- Adults will relate to a particular program or faculty, but are unlikely to connect to the same degree as traditional students with a particular class year – "don't expect them to come back to reunions; they probably won't," Fellows warns.
- If you have a number of adult students who are "later in life," consider whether you can find opportunities to raise awareness about your institution's planned giving programs and opportunities.
- Finally, develop a plan for engaging adult graduates as volunteers.

ADULT ALUMNI AS VOLUNTEERS

A December 2009 study by the Fidelity Charitable Gift Fund and VolunteerMatch offers some compelling data to demonstrate the importance of volunteerism to fundraising:

- The average amount given by volunteers is more than 10 times that given by non-volunteers
- The rate of volunteering increases with education (36 percent of Americans with high school diplomas, 56 percent with four-year degrees, 61 percent with postgraduate degrees)
- 63 percent of Americans cite a renewed sense of the value and importance of service to their community
- 66 percent believe "true philanthropy" involves giving both time and money

Given these statistics and the considerable expertise and talents that many of your adult alumni have developed over their careers, inviting adults to volunteer may be your most effective strategy for engaging adults after commencement. "You have to give them real work to do," Fellows cautions. For example, look to your adult student alumni to serve in mentoring roles for current students or new graduates, or engage them in the context of a career network within their profession.

LEARN MORE ABOUT HARNESSING ALUMNI VOLUNTEERISM

In this February 2011 article in *Higher Ed Impact*, we connected with Jim Langley, founder and president of Langley Innovations, and past vice president of advancement at Georgetown University, and asked for his advice on how advancement shops at colleges and universities can harness the power of alumni volunteerism.