

– CHAPTER FOUR –



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Serving Adult Students

Challenges and Commitments

Serving Adult Students Challenges and Commitments

Dr. Mary Hines: President, Carlow University

National reports identify the trend of increasing numbers of adult students pursuing graduate and undergraduate degrees at colleges and universities. Data shows that adults account for more than 50 percent of higher education enrollment. Many of these students are registered for online and accelerated programs, and many seek to complete degrees or certificates to increase earning potential or change careers or life patterns. Adult student profiles reflect real differences between them and traditional students, especially undergraduates. These differences include their reasons for attending college, motivation and experience levels, time constraints and priorities, and expectations, which are often consumer based. There are commonly cited adult student characteristics. Typically, these students:

- Are highly motivated to learn, but are facing complex schedules
- Are self-directed but impatient with redundancies and unnecessary obstacles
- Are questioners who seek intellectual exchange but draw on their own experiences as a learning base
- Have already formed values, interests, and a sense of their own identity but still desire to grow and are open to new ideas
- Bring advanced credits from other institutions, as well as work and life experiences, but seek the advantage of degree completion
- Have an approach to learning that is practical, goal-oriented, and problem-based and bring a variety of learning styles to the table

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Commonly cited factors that influence the adult student's choice of institution among competing schools include cost, curriculum, convenience, and customer service.

As university or college presidents, we monitor the enrollment of adult students who are contributing in greater numbers to our total FTEs and thus to our revenue and expenses. From a presidential perspective, we consider the enrollment effect of this student population, and we also weigh the challenges they face and the mutual commitments made as they join our institutions. As we place adult students on our rolls, we incur responsibilities to meet their expectations as they must meet ours. What are the obligations we incur when we admit them and accept their tuition? What do we owe them? Are we prepared to allocate resources, develop policies, and organize learning opportunities to promote the success of adult students? What are the obligations they incur when they become our students? What do they owe us? Are they ready to commit the time and effort they need to succeed? These mutual obligations create an interesting moral dynamic: "obligate" is defined as "to bind" and "to be bound" and "to have one's actions restricted because of a prior binding that must be honored in the present." By accepting adult students, we bind ourselves as partners on their educational journey, with each partner sharing corresponding rights and responsibilities. In many ways, these students' rights (to a quality education) are our responsibilities, and our rights (to set the parameters) are their responsibilities. While this is true of all students in relationship with our institutions, have we considered how best to fulfill these obligations to adult students with different challenges and needs?

In this moral context, do we understand the implications of accepting adult students, especially if our institutions were originally established to serve traditional students? How have we accommodated this emerging majority of students? Do we recognize and respect the differences they bring and the obligations we incur in admitting them? Do we remind them of the corresponding obligations they incur, and do we support them in fulfilling them? Do we clearly communicate our expectations, and do we clearly recognize their expectations? In our eagerness to have them come in and to receive the income from their attendance, do we exhibit the same commitment to their outcome of achieving defined learning objectives and provide a positive experience for them at our institutions? Do we treat them as "ends in themselves" and do we track their increased learning as the goal of each semester's journey, or do we treat them as a "means to an end" or "headcount" in meeting our enrollment targets and revenue projections?

This perspective on the topic of “Serving Adult Students” draws on four of my experiences as: an adult undergraduate and graduate student; a teacher of part-time undergraduate adult students; a president of an institution that has served adults for 30 years and that now counts adult students as 60 percent of enrollment; and a philosopher who asks questions to seek understanding and interconnections and identify values and obligations. In sharing these perspectives, I cite challenges, but do not suggest solutions or best practices. I pose questions, but I do not provide answers. I consult experience rather than convey statistics. I provide reflection rather than pursue research.

After reflecting on the challenges of serving adult students and our commitments to them, I came up with several areas of focus. I propose 10 “C-level” sets of questions in areas of concern for your consideration.

1. Core Values, Mission, and Culture

Does our mission include the admission of adult students? Does our institutional and faculty cultures embrace adult students? Can we guarantee the quality of programs and services to adult students? Can we live up to our standards to ensure the value of their degree to the same extent that we ensure the value of the degree received by our traditional students? How do we identify their needs? How do we hold ourselves accountable to meeting those needs? How do we/they define success? How do we track them to measure their success? How do we guarantee the purpose of our core curriculum while accommodating their prior learning and transfer credits? Since the general education core reflects the values of the institution, how do we fit it into course requirements when learning the institution’s values is not the adult student’s real goal? Can professional programs that adult students prefer incorporate enough core elements to communicate the institution’s values? How do we assess transfer credits to both give credence to other institutions courses and meet core requirements? Knowing that adult students do not want to repeat content already credited, how do we acknowledge what they bring to the educational experience and yet have them graduate with our institution’s special “stamp”?

2. Commitment to Student Learning

As we admit adults, what are we willing to admit about them and their characteristics? Do we then shape our services and programs to accommodate those characteristics? Have we learned that the schools that are most successful with students inspire and enlighten them, but also deliver on services and appropriate accommodations in scheduling and identifying requirements? Do we deliver on admissions claims and marketing slogans? Are we open to making adaptations to the way we function and educate in order to change the lives of adult students in ways they seek? Once we recruit students, do we consider how to retain them by responding to their needs and what motivates them? Are we sensitive to their time constraints and multiple priorities as they struggle to meet our requirements? Do administrators truly minister to their needs? How do we accommodate their need for help with time management and responsive scheduling for their busy lives? Do we understand their own best learning style and accommodate them, encouraging them to use learning support services when self-referrals are unsuccessful and providing positive reinforcement when they achieve their goals?

3. Competence

Are our faculty members prepared to deal with adult student needs, styles, expectations, and experiences? Is our faculty culture open to the unique needs and expectations of adult students? Do we retrain our faculty to better teach adult students, knowing that many faculty have had a traditional undergraduate experience both as student and as faculty?

Do we provide faculty development for full-time and adjunct faculty who will teach adult students? Do we assign faculty who are successful in teaching adult students as mentors to those new to this task? Does faculty develop appropriate curriculums and learning outcomes for adult students? Do they adjust to a variety of teaching formats, learning styles, alternative schedules, and classes that encourage dialogue and intellectual exchange with respect for the experiences of others?

4. Competition/Choices

Do we realize what institutional choices are available in our locale for adult students? Have we reviewed what our competitors are doing to attract them, and have we considered how our price, policies, and services might be more competitive without compromising institutional and academic integrity? What are adult students saying about our institutions by leaving for another school or by not coming to us in the first place? Have we recognized the extent to which stealth shopping occurs by adults visiting our Web sites, and do our sites and publications provide enough good information to set us apart from the competition? Have we established articulation agreements with local two-year or community colleges to encourage their students to complete baccalaureate degrees at our institutions? What do we mean when we say we accept transfer credit? How do we facilitate that exchange? How do we count those credits? What are we saying to our colleague institutions by what we do with those credits? What are we saying about our mission and quality and theirs?

5. Cost/Affordability

Do we know that most adult students are paying their own tuition bills, and many do not qualify for certain forms of student financial aid? Do we realize that many employers are reducing employee educational benefits as a way of cutting costs in hard economic times? Are our costs competitive with the other schools our students could choose? Do we provide adult students with need-based institutional or endowment-funded financial aid? Are our billing policies clear and are our collection practices convenient for adults?

6. Convenience of Time and Place

Do our teaching schedules and locations accommodate adult students' needs? Is it possible that, despite the needs of adult students for flexibility of time and place, we continue to develop faculty-friendly schedules? Do our course schedules allow adult students to make progress toward their degrees, or might they find whole semesters when no required courses are available for them, thus extending their time to degree completion? Do we have a reputation for cancelling too many classes? Do we provide a variety of learning formats for adult students? Have we developed multi-semester schedules to assist adult learners adequately plan their course schedules in advance? Do we provide a variety of teaching/learning formats with guaranteed quality in accelerated or heavily independent formats? Are learning objectives of courses met with outcomes comparable to those of traditional students in longer sessions? Are faculty members available to students at times convenient to adult learners? Do adjunct faculty, who often teach evening and weekend courses, schedule office hours for evening and weekend students?

7. Consumer/Customer Services and Expectations

Do we recognize that many adult students approach higher education as consumers who are buying a service and expecting that something good will happen to them as a result? Do we move them beyond a consumer mentality to a value-added experience? Do we realize that something precipitated their decision to start or complete a degree, and are we prepared to help them deal with their issues, challenges, and expectations around that decision? Have our institutions, originally established to serve traditional (and often residential) students, adapted our policies, procedures, and support services to accommodate the educational needs and time constraints of adult students by eliminating unnecessary road blocks? Have we reviewed how we function from the perspective of an adult (usually part-time) student? Do our hours of operation for front-line services extend to evenings and weekends if we offer classes to adult students at those times? Do we flex employee schedules to ensure office coverage of needed functions without requiring additional staff support? Have we considered a one-stop option where adult students can find multiple service resources available in a single location? Have we developed alternative delivery systems for learning and business services by using technology and distance options for adult students? Do we offer the best overall deal for adults returning to school without compromising the essentials of our education? Do we deliver an education that can change their lives?

8. Collaborations/Partnerships in Learning

As we enroll adult students, do we deliver on the promise that we will work with them to achieve their academic goals? Are we good partners in this relationship? How do we demonstrate our respect for their learning styles, maturity, prior experiences, and time? How do we do actually promote their success? How do we prepare our faculty to teach them, and our staff to serve them? How do we guarantee an effective teaching/learning/service collaborative? How do we monitor the steps to achieving a successful outcome for all involved in the partnership? How do we work with other institutions who initially prepare students to transfer to our school?

9. Connections

Do we remain connected with our adult students through their time at our institutions? Do we track their progress, and are we alert to challenges they are facing in pursuit of their goals? How do we support them when they are facing circumstances which could lead to dropping or stopping out? Do we have systems of intervention? Do we follow up with them after a period of stopping out to encourage their return to complete their program? Do we find ways to remain connected with them as alumni of our institutions? Do we track them after graduation? Might there be other programs or progressions we might provide to them to continue their education with us when considering career or life changes over time? Do we communicate with them about opportunities and services, and do we collect and publish their success stories as we do those of traditional graduates?

10. Comprehensive Plan

Do we have an overall strategic plan for serving adult students in academic programs and in support services? Do we reject approaches which are disjointed, reactive, and sporadic? Do we design and foster a culture of service in the context of understanding the learning and logistical needs of adult learners? Do we use data to track our progress in serving adult students, and to track their progress and success? Have we found alternative ways of sharing our institutional values and culture with adult students other than requiring them to take more core courses?

In posing these many questions under 10 key “C” categories, I encourage you to reflect on your unique circumstances and challenges of mission, culture, locale, niche, budget, staffing, and enrollment trends. I know that you will determine your own institutionally appropriate responses to these questions. I applaud you for the progress you have already achieved in honoring your commitments to serve adult students. These students have placed their hope in the educational partnership they have entered with you to achieve their goals.



About the Author

Dr. Mary Hines was appointed Carlow University’s ninth President in May 2005. She came to Carlow from Penn State University’s Wilkes-Barre campus, where she served as its Chancellor/Campus Executive Officer from 1997 until the summer of 2005. Her academic degrees are in Philosophy, and they were all earned as a part-time adult student. Dr. Hines earned her B.A. degree (summa cum laude) from St. Francis College in Brooklyn, where she graduated first in her class and also received the College’s Ethics Award. Her M.A. and Ph.D. were awarded by the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C. Dr. Hines holds the academic rank of Professor of Philosophy at Carlow University.

Dr. Hines’ involvement in higher education spans both the national and international arenas, and locally she serves Pittsburgh and represents Carlow University on numerous boards and committees. She is regularly called upon to speak about educational, ethical, economic development, and leadership issues to business and community organizations, and has been a keynote speaker for various events. Dr. Hines has published articles in newspapers and national journals, and she has been the recipient of many prestigious community, educational, and distinguished leadership awards.

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