

Chapter 1

ADVISING ADULT LEARNERS

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Advisors play a vital role in teaching adult learners how to juggle school and their lives. In this chapter, Baily provides insights into the characteristics of adult learners, how they learn, and the barriers they encounter. She presents various ways to meet their needs and how to advise underprepared and at-risk students, single parents, students with military affiliations, and students in accelerated, distance, and Internet degree programs. She addresses the importance of conducting assessments of advising programs for adult learners.

Introduction

Advisors across North America have noticed the dramatic increase in the number of adult students in recent decades. In their chapter, "Adult Learners in Higher Education," Kasworm, Sandmann, and Sissel (2000) noted that one half of the students who had received credit at U.S. institutions by 1991 were adults but that administrators still considered them the *nontraditional* or "not the normal" population of higher education. The Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics (2002) reported that the "traditional" undergraduate—characterized as one who earns a high school diploma, enrolls full-time immediately after finishing high school, depends on parents for financial support, and either does not work during the school year or works part-time—is the exception rather than the rule. In the 1999–2000 academic year, only 27% of undergraduates met all of these traditional-student criteria. Thus, 73% of all undergraduates were in some way "nontraditional."

Although the basic academic-advising information may be the same for all students, how the information is presented to adult learners makes a great deal of difference to those students. In this chapter, I provide advisors with some insights into the many

facets of adult learners so that they can better relate to and communicate with them.

In one appointment, an advisor may encounter a newly divorced mother of six who wants to go to law school after finishing her degree and in the next meet an ex-addict turned chemical dependency counselor who struggles to finish his degree while fighting liver disease. Survivors of child abuse, adults who are the first in their family to go to college, factory workers looking for career advancement as well as students who want to finish the degree they started 20 years ago will cross the threshold of the advisor's door. While not all adult students have such dramatic stories, advisors find that many of these students struggle in the pursuit of a college degree.

Characteristics of Adult Learners

Adult learners share certain basic characteristics. First, they come to the classroom with a wealth of experience; various jobs, marriage, parenthood, volunteer responsibilities, and civic duties provide them a background that traditional-aged students do not bring to college. They can then relate this extensive background to their classroom learning. They are also highly motivated to learn. They return to school voluntarily, usually investing their own money to learn something specific that they believe will help them solve a problem or cope with a life situation. They recognize their need to learn something new. Adult learners have specific goals in mind. They want to learn skills to qualify for a promotion or to enter a new career field, to speak a language for a future vacation or business trip, or to enjoy a hobby more fully.

Unlike the traditional college-aged students who prepare for an unknown future, adults plan to put their learning to use immediately in their lives. Niemi (1982, p.12) testified that adults' varied experiences produce "more sophisticated insights . . .

[that] make it easier for [adult] learners to recognize how ideas could be transformed into action and theory into practice in the world outside of the classroom." I find that educators have perceived these adult learners to be highly motivated, to have well-focused goals, to participate well in class, to relate well to the younger students, to be open to new ideas, and to be extremely conscientious about completing assignments. Adults come into higher education with many strengths.

Adults also enter postsecondary education with serious complications from their personal and professional lives. Some attend classes on a part-time basis. They often hold full-time jobs, care for families, and continue their commitments to other organizations while enrolled in higher education courses. They have many more serious distractions and interruptions to their studies than do most traditional-aged college students. Many of these learners have been away from the classroom environment for a long time. They usually experience a lack of self-confidence when faced with a new learning situation. A fear of change, common to many adults, may be compounded by anxieties lingering from previous, unpleasant, learning situations. Brookfield (2006) confirmed this lack of self-confidence in his four insights about adult learners. He stated that adult students experience:

- *impostership*. They feel that they are out of place, that they do not belong, that they are masquerading as students, and that someone is going to find out that they are imposters on campus.
- *cultural suicide*. Their families and coworkers, even those who seemed extremely supportive at the outset, become increasingly irritated and frustrated with the changes resulting from the adult's pursuit of education. The laundry, dishes, housework, and other tasks are not maintained as before. The children resent that the parent cannot attend school plays, games, or other activities. Coworkers do not respond well to the student leaving work early once or twice a week to attend class. The family members fear that the relationship will change when the student becomes educated. Coworkers may fear that the student will surpass them at the job because of this added education.
- *lost innocence*. Adult learners have usually thought about higher education for quite some time and they may have elevated that experience in their own minds. They may think of the ivory tower as a special place of intellect and learning. When the reality of the higher edu-

cation experience becomes apparent—professors disagree with one another and expensive textbooks contain inaccuracies—adult students can become disenchanted. They may ask why they should be spending their time and money on such an uncertain process.

- *road running*. Most adults undergo some crisis during their educational experiences: They feel like they have run into a wall. If they can jump back up and try again, they will persist to graduation, but if they do not, they will drop out in despair. Although Brookfield (2006) called it "road running," this phenomenon would more appropriately be called the "Wile E. Coyote factor," for it is not the road runner who must pick himself up, dust himself off, and start over again; it is Wile who must regroup.

Despite the many strengths that they possess, adult learners struggle with time commitments, and advisors must consider the adult students' multiple responsibilities when helping them plan for an education.

The largest segment of the adult learner population states occupation-related reasons that motivate them (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999, p. 52). They seek promotions and advancement within their existing careers or they seek a career change. Higher education makes that change possible. A smaller group of adult learners, those who have reached a certain level of success in their professional lives, do not seek education for a career change, but rather to enhance their lives or to relieve boredom. For example, a successful engineer who has a passion for the American Revolution earns a master's degree and shares the passion of history with students as an adjunct professor in the history department. Other adult learners who have recently experienced a dramatic change in their lives, through job loss, divorce, death of a loved one, or other life crisis, may come to higher education to learn how to cope with the situation.

Stages of adult development correspond to many of the triggering situations in individual lives. Aslanian and Brickell (1980, p. 39) identified triggers that "precipitate the decision to learn at that point in time." These triggers may include getting married, having a baby, getting fired, joining the military, getting divorced, having a heart attack, facing a loved one's death, or retiring. Adult learners seek to make a transition from their status prior to the triggering event to a new status. They see benefits to be gained from this change; those benefits motivate them to learn necessary information and skills. These triggering events occur for different individ-

uals at different times, sometimes early or sometimes late in life.

The learning selected as a response to the trigger may not directly relate to the triggering event itself. A heart attack, for example, may demonstrate the necessity to give up a high-pressure profession such as sales. The learner might select an accounting course to prepare for a more sedate career or a class to cultivate a hobby that would serve as an outlet for the stress of the job. Similar triggering events might stimulate quite different responses regarding education among different individuals.

One way in which adults make passage through the crises of adult life is through education. Adults move from a conformist beginning, following their family's and society's norms, through conscientious self-evaluation, and toward an integrated personality that reconciles inner conflicts and respects individuality (Loevinger, 1976, pp. 24–25). Education facilitates this progressive personal development and assists adults making the passage from one stage of adulthood to the next.

Cross (1981) viewed the decision to participate in higher education not as a single act, but as an entire chain of response. According to her, self-esteem and attitudes about education, based upon previous experience, combine to give the person either a propensity or an aversion toward educational experiences. A person with positive experiences may consider the value of education via the expectancy-valence theory. If the importance of their goals ranks sufficiently high and upon confirmation that the education will allow them to meet those goals, adult students will consider life's crises to be teachable moments (p. 127). Once the individual decides that education might satisfy current goals, force field analysis, through which positive and negative forces are weighed, often can be used to explain the final decision to pursue education. For example, if family support is weak or if job opportunities will be unavailable at the end of the learning experience, negative forces may outweigh the student's desire to change careers; however, if the potential education opportunities fit desired goals, the adult learner may consider the barriers low enough to hurdle. Once the adult participates in a new learning project, the success or failure of that experience reenters into the individual's attitudes about education and becomes part of a new chain of response toward the next learning event.

Adult students, who are often self-starters accustomed to taking the initiative at work or in their personal lives, use their skills to advocate for their own needs in the higher education environment. For example, they may design their own spreadsheets to

track progress toward their degree, ask permission from professors to take a test or submit a paper early to accommodate an out-of-town business trip, or explore alternative routes to earn credits (e.g., challenge exams, portfolios, college level examination program [CLEP] tests, etc.).

The following examples illustrate the skills adults may use to improve their chances of success. An adult student who took a CLEP test earned a score one point lower than mandatory to fulfill the requirement, but he proved to be an adroit self-advocate. He explained to the dean that, according to the catalog in use when he had entered the university 2 years prior, his score was acceptable for the CLEP requirement. He received credit for the course. Another adult student in English composition, disappointed by the ability level of the traditional students in the class, met with her advisor to design a strategy to "challenge out" of the next required composition course. Although both of these strategies were articulated in the university catalog, students not savvy enough to become informed seldom used them. Adult students, generally, have the independence, creativity, and inventiveness to research alternative options to the standard requirements.

How Adult Learners Learn

Once motivated to begin an experience in higher education, how do adult learners differ from traditional-aged college students? Knox (1977) pointed out that adults often lack the perspective to assess their own learning ability. He said that adult learners "tend to overemphasize their early formal school experience and to underemphasize their recent experience with graduate and informal learning" (p. 412). Longitudinal studies of adult learning abilities, generally based on intelligence tests administered at different points in the adult's life, "indicate a high degree of stability between twenty and fifty years of age and even beyond" (Knox, p. 415). However, researchers of cross-sectional studies based on a representative sample of adults from various ages "report a decline with age in test performance" (Knox, p. 416). Knox (p. 417) explained the different results:

There is evidence of an increasing range of individual differences in learning abilities, at least through the fifties. It appears that the most intellectually able people increase their learning ability more rapidly during childhood and adolescence, reach a higher plateau later in young adulthood, and then either continue to increase gradually or maintain learning ability during adulthood.

By contrast the least intellectually able people increase learning ability more slowly, reach a lower plateau earlier, and decline more rapidly.

Knox (1977) noted that the two subfactors of intelligence help explain the different learning abilities of adult learners. Fluid intelligence involves use of short-term memory, formation of concepts, and engagement in abstract reasoning. It presents itself in rote memorization, word analogies, verbal reasoning, and inductive reasoning (pp. 419–420). Crystallized intelligence is based on acculturation and involves the knowledge that the individual can extract from the social and physical environment (p. 420). Knox reported that

fluid intelligence, along with crystallized intelligence, increases during childhood and into adolescence. However, with the slowing of the maturation process and the lifelong accumulation of injury to neural structures, fluid intelligence tends to peak during adolescence and decline gradually during adulthood. . . . By contrast, crystallized intelligence continues to increase gradually throughout adulthood. (p. 421)

Knox's explanation means that adults may perform progressively less well on timed performance tests, but in untimed general-intelligence tests, in which the scores relate directly to crystallized intelligence, those in their 50s had the same or higher scores than those tested in their 20s. Knox (p. 421) concluded that "general learning ability remains relatively stable, but the older person tends to increasingly compensate for the loss of fluid intelligence by greater reliance on crystallized intelligence to substitute wisdom for brilliance."

Due to crystallized intelligence, critical thinking skills may increase with age. Likewise, creativity stems from individual factors that cannot be attributed to age. Knox (1977, p. 469) confirmed that "adults can learn almost anything they want . . . given time, persistence, and assistance."

Beyond general learning ability, Knox (1977) identified five distinct age-related characteristics of the adult learning process:

- Adults want control. Adults want to understand everything presented and have an intense concern for accuracy. This persistence can block flexibility and creative thought, just as it can assure success (p. 434).

- Memory requires more time for adults than for younger students. Adults may need to increase the frequency and intensity of exposure to retain the material. If they organize the materials at the time of input and if those materials are meaningful to the learner, memory is enhanced.
- Adults need more practice, more orientation, study skills, and continued support.
- Previously learned materials interfere with adult learning. Knox reported that "it is necessary to unlearn the interfering material as well as to learn the new material" (p. 439).
- Adults reduce their speed of learning while concentrating more attention to accuracy.

Knox asserted,

Adults of any age, but especially older adults, learn most effectively when they set their own pace, take a break periodically, and fit the distribution of learning episodes to the content. . . . If adults are forced to proceed much faster or slower than their preferred pace, their learning effectiveness typically declines. (p. 440)

Even after identifying these age-related characteristics of adult learning, educators must acknowledge the individual variety of abilities and disabilities among adult learners. Little of the great variability in adult ability can be traced directly to age.

Even though the speed of reaction time, perception, and performance of manual tasks slows considerably with age, with continuous use, the capacity to use language improves throughout life (Kidd, 1973, p. 84). Therefore, learning based upon vocabulary and involving "linguistic or symbolic constructs can mature and increase in quality throughout life" (Kidd, p. 88).

However, the use of mathematical symbols declines dramatically among adults, who generally do better in courses dealing with literature, philosophy, or history than they do in mathematics or sciences. Perhaps this is due to "lack of practice, lack of interest, or even the resigned acceptance . . . that they cannot do mathematics" (Kidd, 1973, p. 91). Adults learn well when they concentrate their new learning in areas in which they already have solid experience. Their motivation is a major factor in their success. Kidd also noted that judgment and reasoning ability peaks latest in life and that exercising the mind seems to retard the intellect deterioration that accompanies aging.

Adult learners bring to higher education motivation, experience, verbal abilities, and judgment. The few deficiencies in learning abilities experienced by adults may be overcome through advising, curricula, and instructional methods designed to meet the special needs of adult learners.

Barriers to Adult Learning

Adults face barriers traditional students may not. Mercer (as cited in Fairchild, 2003) divided barriers to persistence into three main areas: situational, dispositional, and institutional. Advisors help students address all of these and help mitigate the latter.

Situational

Multiple responsibilities. External situational barriers include family, work, and civic responsibilities. Each student's situation is unique. Young children often require more time, child-care resources, and effort than do older children. Some adults have sick parents or special needs children. Employers may be inflexible.

Finance issues constitute one of the largest situational barriers many adults face. Rent and food must take precedence over tuition, and some students live paycheck to paycheck even before they enroll in college. They need education to get out of the cycle, but financial aid may not cover all expenses, forcing them to work for their survival or health care benefits.

According to Home (as cited in Fairchild, 2003), dispositional barriers are internal responses. They include conflicts from simultaneous, incompatible demands, role overload, insufficient time to meet demands, and role contagion (preoccupation with one role while performing another). Low income heightens the barrier. Being caught between taking a test or taking care of a sick parent, an adult student may experience guilt and anxiety. Other students refuse to give up community or church activities.

Advisors can help students realize that being a single parent, working full-time, and going to school full-time is too great a burden and that enrolling in fewer credits each semester may be both appropriate and acceptable. Some students need to learn from their own mistakes, but by teaching students to forecast their responses to situations, choose activities, and assertively say "no," advisors can help adult students deal with the problems that arise. Advisors could

- ask adult students to keep track of their activities for one week,

- ask how students will make time for classes and studying in addition to those weekly activities,
- use examples of past students' experiences,
- have other students discuss their situations in orientations, and
- help new students make more realistic decisions.

Prior negative learning experiences. Quigley (1997) referred to several studies that indicated that most adults resist returning to education because of the nature of school itself and the adults' previous negative experiences in school. Merriam and Caffarella (1999) cited numerous studies in which researchers asked why adults do not participate in adult education. They included the following reasons given by adults for not pursuing education (pp. 56–60):

- lack of time,
- lack of money,
- cost of education,
- family responsibilities,
- feeling "too old,"
- work demands,
- lack of awareness of educational possibilities,
- institutional barriers that discourage adults,
- lack of confidence,
- lack of course relevance, and
- lack of a support system.

These seem to be the socially acceptable reasons adults give when asked to discuss barriers to their participation in adult education. In only one study did researchers mention the relevance of K-12 education, noting that previous success in school was a factor in participation.

Churchill (2005) reported that prior K-12 school experiences negatively affected adults' decisions to go back to school. When students in Churchill's study talked about the barriers to education, they mentioned all of the socially acceptable reasons noted by previous researchers. However, when they wrote about their previous educational experiences, adults referenced the prior negative school experiences that made returning to school a fearful undertaking. Churchill suggested that advisors use the awareness "that the fears returning adult students feel may be due to previous school experiences" (p. 299) to make the appropriate inquiries and assurances:

When I meet with a new prospective student
I am now more intentional about bringing up

the "fear factor" with such questions as, "Are you a little nervous about starting this program?" Most students reply that they are "a lot nervous!" This gives me the opportunity to let them know that this is a good indication that they will be successful because students who are fearful really care about their education, and adults who care this much usually succeed. I also assure them that this educational experience will be different and that this is the perfect time for them to complete a degree. Students will frequently refer to this "fear factor" discussion when they are about to graduate, and they indicate that it helped them believe that they just might be successful as an adult student. (Personnel Communication, D. Churchill, November 20, 2006)

Dispositional

Lack of appreciation for general education learning. Many adult learners question the need for math and liberal arts courses that comprise most general education requirements. How do advisors encourage students to understand the value of these classes? Knowing the background, motivation, and interest of the particular adult learner can help an advisor tailor the response. Some students may love learning; however, students who have been downsized may remain unconvinced that history or biology classes can help them prepare for a new career. Information about how the liberal arts will help them obtain a job generally piques students' interest.

The *Job Outlook 2006* survey conducted by the National Association of Colleges and Employers lists the top personal qualities for which employers look:

- communication skills (verbal and written),
- honesty and integrity,
- teamwork skills (works well with others),
- strong work ethic,
- analytical skills,
- flexibility and adaptability,
- interpersonal skills (relates well to others),
- motivation and ability to take the initiative,
- computer skills, and
- ability to be detail oriented.

The liberal arts stress these employer-sought qualities. The study of the liberal arts cultivates a free and flexible mind that is able to respond sensitively to different points of view. Business leaders often want to hire creative people, critical thinkers who can adapt to a quickly changing global market-

place; however, students do not always receive this information about employers (Hones & Sullivan-Vance, 2006). Students may react favorably to recent local surveys or to quotations from well-known local employers. Faculty members can provide specific examples: The interior design instructor can emphasize to students that precise measurements and calculations save money and prevent mistakes, or a business instructor can explain why communication skills and integrity are critical to aspiring entrepreneurs.

In another tactic to encourage appreciation of learning, Shoenberg (2005) suggested that philosophical questions (e.g., "How do you want to be different at the end of your time in college?") can help adult students find relevance in general education requirements. Advisors can hand the student a blank piece of paper and state, "This is your degree. What will separate you from everyone else? It is the education you build for yourself. It is the process." Advisors can ask the students their favorite interrogative (why, how, what if, etc.), and then suggest a variety of subjects that offer answers to those questions. They can inform adult learners that training teaches one for successful repetition of tasks, but education teaches one to think (Hones & Sullivan-Vance, 2006). They can remind adults that education offers a chance to live life more fully.

While most of the burden of proof about the value of liberal arts will fall on the faculty, advisors can encourage students to take interesting subjects that are taught by excellent teachers. Instructors excited about their fields instill the love of learning, and adult students who learn from them may appreciate learning for its own sake.

Time concerns. Adult students often lament that they have waited a long time to begin a college degree. They may feel that they are too old or will be too old by the time they have earned their degrees to continue the effort. A student may bemoan the 5- or 6-year time line to graduation, "I'll be 50 years old by the time I've earned my degree!" However, the advisor can pointedly reply: "You will be 50 at that time anyway, wouldn't it be better to have a degree?"

To give them some perspective on time, advisors can confront adults with the observation of many graduates: Time went by quickly! Adults are often surprised at the relatively short time span needed to complete the required classes. Some of these same students will continue their education into graduate school.

Perfectionism. Adult learners need to hear that they need not earn straight A's to be successful. Advisors often comment that they do not know how

to handle a distraught adult learner who has received that first B. Most adult learners aspire to the best possible grades because they are paying for it themselves and want to achieve the highest scores in the class. When they receive a grade beneath their expectations, they can become completely demoralized. However, perfection is not required to earn a college degree; persistence is the essential factor. The advisor can put the grade into perspective by explaining that one low grade will not stop a determined student from graduating.

Institutional Barriers

Rules. Cumbersome institutional rules make adult student attendance to college impossible. Such incumbent institutional barriers include

- admission standards based on high school test scores,
- refusal to accept old college credits,
- refusal to grant credit for life experiences,
- inconveniently scheduled classes, and
- need for signatures in various offices across campus.

Advisors can work with the institution to break down barriers. Many colleges, such as Thomas Edison State College (www.tesc.edu) and University of Wisconsin–Superior (www.uwsuper.edu/admissions/transfers/), accept old credits and have options for proving prior learning, such as portfolios, to lower the barriers to higher education. A conveniently located one-stop shop with extended hours and committed staff can certainly help make adult students feel welcomed. On-line programs also eliminate many institutional barriers.

Instructors and other students. The life experiences of adult learners may contribute significantly to their own learning, but they can be intimidating to a young instructor. Also, traditional-aged students may not appreciate hearing adult students' stories in class. Adult learners must express their narratives in a nonthreatening manner with instructors and other students. Advisors can help them learn when to share and when to keep quiet with different instructors and in different kinds of classes.

Advisors can also help adult learners distinguish between professional advisors, who advise students full-time, and faculty advisors, who share program- and course-specific information according to discipline. For example, they can explain that professional advisors provide the initial advising, often in a center, and help students meet general education requirements

and select a major; faculty advisors help students define their majors and complete the degree requirements. Adults should be informed that faculty advisors can further serve as mentors and ease students into professions after they graduate.

Unfriendly stopping-out policies. Sometimes barriers prove too overwhelming and a student stops out. Institutions should make reenrollment easy, support a reasonable stop-out policy (e.g., unpenalized leaves of absence for up to a year), help the stopped-out student to feel a part of the community, and allow students to continue pursuing their educations with the same degree requirements as when they had begun their programs. Working within such programs, institutional staff can retain the students who stop out, prevent them from becoming drop outs, and help them complete their degrees.

National barriers. Finally, public policies may form national institutional barriers. Welfare reform in the mid-1990s severely limited the number of students who could find a way out of poverty through education, and recent proposals will make it even more difficult for low-income citizens to pursue college degrees (Chew, 2006). National financial aid policies should provide more grant assistance for the poor and for part-time or accelerated learning programs. State funding can also be used for adult students, as it is in the Hamilton College Access Project (www.hamilton.edu/college/access/), which helps low income students earn an education. Some students may be encouraged by advisors who suggest engagement in political action designed to change the financial aid or political system.

Meeting the Needs of Adult Learners

To assuage the anxiety that most adult learners feel (e.g., impostership as identified by Brookfield [2006]), adult learners need to understand that they are not alone. Orientation programs should provide adult learners an opportunity to meet other nontraditional students, preferably current students who have experienced success and who can testify to their initial fears and their growing confidence toward accomplishing their academic goals. In addition to statistics about the number of adult learners, advisors should discuss these students' typical grades and reassure them with stories of other adult learners.

A peer mentorship program matching new adult students with successful students, preferably in their own major area, will give new students a personal connection to the institution during the first semester. Trained peer mentors should have knowledge about courses and professors as well as the campus services to which they can refer the stu-

dents. Meredith College's 23+ Program (www.meredith.edu/admissions/twentythree-plus-applicants.htm) uses its WINGS student leaders as peer mentors, and the Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU) (www.mtsu.edu/~owls/) OWLs (Older Wiser Learners) offers new adult learners an experienced student as a peer mentor to assist them during their first semester. MTSU also provides an on-line peer-mentor training program.

Brookfield (2006) defined cultural suicide as the change in family and coworker relationships that result from the adult learner's pursuit of higher education. Acquainting students with the phenomenon and warning them that it might happen to them, advisors can effectively prepare adult students to overcome it, and it can also be addressed during orientation or freshman seminar courses. Replying that their families and friends are very supportive, students often deny the possibility of cultural suicide affecting them; however, within just a few weeks of classes, some will return with an exclamation "It happened to me!" The family suddenly rebels at the changes in family dynamics. Advisors who have prepared students for the eventuality help them deal with it. One student said, "I would have been hurt when my family started fussing about my going to school if you had not told us that it might happen." As a result of the advisor's preparation, this student was able to handle the crisis more effectively and find ways to ensure that the family felt included in her educational experience.

Adult students should approach disgruntled coworkers differently than family members. Rather than trying to include coworkers in the educational experience, students may need to refrain from talking too much about all that they are learning. Coworkers who do not have college degrees may be jealous and consider the enthusiastic student a braggart. Advisors who suggest that adult learners downplay their student role at work offer valuable counsel.

Brookfield's (2006) concept of lost innocence describes adult learners' disenchantment with the reality of higher education. The disillusionment may not be manifested for several semesters or years after matriculation, but students who can recognize it are cushioned for a softer landing than are those whose advisors had not prepared them.

Despite advisors' best efforts, students must deal with road running on their own. Personal resilience will determine the success of one's crisis

management; however, students aware that this major life obstacle may affect them can plan contingencies for it. Advisors at MTSU have incorporated Brookfield's (2006) four insights about adult students into adult orientation programs and advising adult students. Many of these adult students report that they had never thought about illness, death, flood, or fire affecting them while attending college and that they had first considered the handling of such emergencies during orientation or an advising conference. Because retention remains an important goal for students and the institution, advisors who broach a discussion on possible crises and their resolutions equip advisees to handle the unexpected.

An emotionally sustaining peer-learning community reinforces persistence among adult learners. By encouraging adult learners to make on-campus connections with other adult learners, advisors contribute to that persistence. The peers support students through general education, motivate them to continue into their majors, and bolster them in tough times. Positively affected by peer camaraderie, students who have made it through the initial requirements enjoy freedom to select more courses that interest them, and their success in such classes further motivates them to persist to graduation.

Customer Service and Academic Advising for Adult Learners

The educational institutions that focus on excellent service and support tend to have the most success, but customer service for adult learners presents unique challenges for academic advisors. Adults do not want to feel as if they are being treated like teenagers or young adults, yet they still need all of the same information—sometimes even more. In addition to the respect and accurate information that all advisees expect, adults need accessible and specialized services, such as evening office hours and child-friendly areas. By anticipating students' needs, the institutional stakeholders, including advisors, produce satisfaction, contribute support, and provide optimal customer service, increasing the likelihood that students will return and offer word of mouth that entices prospective students.

Respect

Adult learners, like most individuals, respond best when their advisors are polite, respectful, and unrushed during the interview process. While advisors must take the extra time to ensure that students

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process the information given and then ask the appropriate questions that they need answered, the effort pays off because students who leave feeling confident and well-informed will require less time-consuming sessions later. Basic information offered in a comfortable environment relieves the anxiety that many adult learners experience when they return to school after a long absence. Therefore, to help adult students finish a task that to them may seem impossible (e.g., graduation), advisors should focus on the students' comfort, confidence, and empowerment.

Extended Hours and Centralized Services

Extended office hours make advising accessible to adult students. At the Hamilton Holt School Evening Degree Programs at Rollin College advising appointments are scheduled as early as 7:30 a.m. and as late as 6:30 p.m. This schedule meets advisee needs and also allows advisors to create a flexible schedule of their own, which many advisors with children or other obligations find helpful.

Also, those creating advisor programs should realize that adult learners work on tight schedules and can benefit from multiple services offered in a central location. A one-stop shop, where during registration, for example, they can get their student identification cards, parking decals, and bursar functions, provides an appreciated alternative to the all-campus scramble.

Child Friendliness

Adult learners may bring young children to their advising appointments. By providing a small basket of toys, blocks, or other playthings to occupy the child, advisors can keep parents occupied on advising issues instead of the toddler. The parents will not only appreciate the family-friendly atmosphere but will focus more on their own needs as students. In addition, the advisor can take advantage of the situation to discuss the particular child-care options available to students and offer some guidance on communicating with instructors when the student's child is sick or when differing elementary-school and college holiday calendars create a conflict for the student. Also, the advisor should ensure that the student knows about any restrictions to children in the classroom.

Quick Response Time

Adult learners value excellent customer service as they usually juggle a job with raising children and tending to household needs. Because of the limited flexibility in their tight schedules, adult students

especially appreciate prompt return of phone calls and E-mails as well as scheduled appointments that begin on time. By leaving specific phone or E-mail messages in response to a question or with information on the best time to be reached on the phone, advisors save both parties valuable time and unnecessary frustration.

Undivided Attention

Advisors must commit to providing undivided attention through both verbal and nonverbal communication. Advisors who pay attention to students' body language can often discern when advisees do not completely understand the concept being discussed and can clarify without causing the student embarrassment. Advisors need to remember that each question and answer is new to the student, and by asking advisees to repeat or rephrase information, advisors help adult students grasp the entire picture. By employing these techniques, listening to the entire question before responding, and paying attention to how the student asks the question, advisors can respond effectively and without feeling as if they are repeating themselves.

Technical Proficiency

Not all adult learners are proficient with computers and the Internet. In addition, even those adults who use the Web may be offended when an advisor responds to a question with "the information is on our Web site." (Those who did not grow up during the computer age may perceive such a response, no matter how politely rendered, as a rude put-off to the inquiry.) Advisors should ask about adult students' technical abilities and then provide direct Web site addresses as well as encouragement to recontact the advisor with follow-up questions.

Knowledge Proficiency

To provide academic support and to direct students to appropriate resources, advisors must be knowledgeable about the campus and institutional policies. However, whether advising for 1 week or 10 years, an advisor may be stumped by a student's question. Because nothing is more frustrating for a student than being given the wrong information, an advisor who cannot answer a question must admit it and find the answer within a timely manner or offer to transfer the student to someone who knows the answer. However, to ensure that the meeting goes quickly and smoothly between a student and

*Adult learners
value excellent
customer
service as they
usually juggle
a job with
raising
children and
tending to
household
needs.*

another personal resource, the advisor should provide as much information about the student's needs as possible to the person who can answer the student's query. In addition, the advisor should follow up whenever possible to ensure that the student has received a satisfactory answer to the question.

Adult learners often look to their advisor to solve problems over which the advisor has little or no control. In these cases, the advisor must determine whether the student needs advising or other types of information. Advisors who take the time to listen to students can sometimes help them solve their own problems, and such a sounding board is often the support that the student wants or needs.

Making a Connection

Adults, especially insecure new students, prefer to establish a relationship with one advisor rather than see a staff of advisors. Therefore, where possible, administrators should systematically assign students to advisors so that the advisee and advisor can develop a rapport. When the advisor is an age-peer of the adult student, the two may share interests, life experiences, and possibly values that reinforce their affinity. However, a young advisor may be coming from a very different place than the adult student, and the lack of shared perspective may negatively affect the relationship. Younger advisors can get secondhand information about adult learners in this chapter and in other sources; however, as they gain experience as advisors, they will be encouraged with their firsthand understanding of adult learners as well.

Advisors link the students to the university, and they are especially needed in two critical roles: as liaisons and advocates. They serve as liaisons between the student and the system and provide the student with the skills and the experience to navigate the university system. Advisors also serve in an advocacy role, passing along to administrators the suggestions that come from discussions with adult students.

Advising Special Adult Populations

Advising Underprepared and At-Risk Adult Learners

Some adult learners lack preparation and academic skills. Many have never taken college preparatory classes. Advisors can discuss how to meet unique academic needs through orientation sessions, tutoring, study skills, or special classes. Although some students balk at taking noncredit classes, advisors can stress to them that these courses can help them hone the skills that they will need to be successful

in the required credit courses.

Orientation programs for adult learners. Many institutions of higher education offer separate orientation programs designed to lower the barriers to education for adult learners. These programs facilitate the transition of adult learners into the academic environment and function as stepping stones to persistence, success, and retention. Through timely, relevant, practical, and personalized content, they provide students opportunities to connect and build communities with other adult learners, promote self-confidence, and serve as marketing tools. Characteristics of successful adult-learner orientation programs include the following:

- relevant to needs of adult learners,
- source of practical information about the campus,
- offered at varied times,
- structured in small groups,
- personalized as much as possible,
- opportunity for students' input and questions, and
- focused on information students need to know before classes begin.

Adult student organizations can help with orientation sessions, providing some of the support that adult students may not receive from family or friends.

Governors State University in Illinois has developed an on-line orientation and directed self-placement program to serve its students, many of whom had stopped out for as many as 10 years and need help with math and writing. These on-line assessment tools help students determine their need for a supplemental writing or math course. See the Exemplary Practice for Governors State University at the end of this chapter.

Transition courses. Because of the success of freshman seminar courses, many institutions have developed a variety of transition courses for new adult learners and reentry students. Some offer noncredit evening and weekend workshops on various topics. Others offer noncredit pre-semester or partial semester courses for a few weeks at the beginning of the semester. Others have expanded these opportunities to semester-long courses for one to three credits. On-line courses are also used to reach adult students. Some topics that may be covered by transition courses include the following:

- how to read a syllabus,
- faculty expectations,
- time management,

Table 1 Notable practices in adult student education

Broome Community College in New York offers a freshman experience course designed specifically for adult learners in business programs. The course meets once a week for the entire semester and students earn one credit. A course description is available at www.sunybroome.edu/courses/bus.html#BUS107

Kennesaw State University in Georgia offers stand-alone workshops on computer basics, the use of the TI83 calculator, positive parenting strategies, and succeeding in academia. See www.kennesaw.edu/admissions/nontraditional.html

Middle Tennessee State University offers a three-credit on-line freshman seminar course designed to help adult learners to refresh their study skills, learn to research and write a college paper, and to utilize their thinking and writing skills when taking tests and writing papers. For more information log onto www.mtsu.edu/~u101irm/univ101/u101.htm

St. Charles Community College in Missouri offers a 3-day, noncredit returning learners' workshop. Students who attend the workshop are waived from the mandatory college orientation. Supported by the campus Returning Learners Club, workshop attendees learn about time management, developing a support system, library resources, financial aid, degree programs, study tips, and on the last day, a panel of current adult students offer hints and tips. For more information log onto www.stchas.edu/nso/goneinyears.shtml

The University of Wisconsin at Madison offers various workshops both on-line and in person. One workshop is titled Building Bridges: Networking and Campus Resources for Returning Adult Students. During this workshop, participants may meet other returning adult students and advisors. They will learn about campus libraries, financial aid, computer resources, and so forth. To learn about this workshop and others offered, go to the adult and student services Web site at www.dcs.wisc.edu/services/

- financial aid and scholarship opportunities for nontraditional students,
- developing a support system,
- test-taking strategies,
- career planning,
- learning and teaching styles,
- math anxiety and math review,
- how to use a calculator,
- stress management,
- accessing campus resources,
- accessing library resources via the Web,
- an introduction to campus computing resources, and
- panel of alumni adult learners.

Advisors can point students to a host of study skills books to help them transition into college. However, *How to Study in College* by William Pauk (2003) is a particularly good choice; it is very comprehensive, well organized, and replete with examples. In addition, the methods Pauk illustrates are based on research. Dave Ellis's (2006) *Becoming a Master Student*, although directed for use in freshman experience courses, includes information for adult learners and their needs. Felder and Soloman

(n.d.) have posted a useful description of learning styles. See Table 1 for examples of institutions that offer notable transition programs.

Study skills workshops. If no transition classes are available or if the adult students cannot take one, study skills workshops may help students lessen anxiety and increase their skills as well as experience camaraderie with other students. In ideal situations, participants attend voluntarily because they want to become more successful in college; however, many institutions require students on probation to attend such workshops. Study skills workshops for adult learners should include only nontraditional students because their needs are different from those of the traditional students. If group sessions are impossible to schedule, then individual meetings may prove satisfactory as the facilitator can tailor the advice or referral to specific needs.

Facilitators of study skills workshops for adults should provide some alternative ways to approach studying and some tips, but they should refrain from providing all the answers. Often students can learn a great deal from each other, especially if the group consists of new and continuing students. Good facilitators promote this peer learning. The follow-

ing skills can be taught via workshop:

- time management,
- learning styles,
- note taking (including idea mapping),
- test preparation techniques,
- ways to improve reading,
- test taking,
- overcoming test anxiety, and
- how to research and write a college paper.

Facilitators should provide plenty of examples and allow time for participant sharing and problem solving. In addition, an up-to-date campus-specific list of resources should be made available to students.

Facilitators may need to experiment to find a good time for workshops. For example, after trying a series of weekly sessions that were poorly attended, the presenters of the 23+ Program at Meredith College (www.meredith.edu/admissions/twentythree-plus-applicants.htm) began offering 3-hour Saturday morning sessions 1 or 2 weeks after each semester began because students had said they could commit to coming for one block of time once during the semester.

On-line workshops or tutorials can serve many adult students who cannot fit a timed workshop into their schedules. MTSU (www.mtsu.edu/~owls/) had offered short single-topic workshops to adult students at varied times during the week, but because attendance dwindled facilitators are now making workshops available on-line in hopes of reaching busy adult students at their convenience.

Addressing math anxiety. Why do adult learners fear math? Why does the mere mention of taking a math course send shivers up the spine of many adult students? Students often explain, "I'm not good at math." For most, their exclamation means "I wasn't good at math years ago." By pointing out that students use mathematics in their everyday lives, advisors help adult students gain confidence and overcome some of their math anxiety. Advisors can also encourage them by explaining that college-level math courses are required to earn both their college degree and enhance their professional lives.

Advisors must ensure that students take the math course(s) needed in the desired major. Advisors should make sure that fearful students only enroll in the required course(s) to complete the requirements for their degree; apprehensive adults will not appreciate advice to take nonrequired math classes. Advisors must inform students of math substitutions, such as statistics or logic courses, if offered.

While advisors cannot excuse students from required math courses, they can recommend options with regard to the method used in or the venue of

the classes. Adult students uncomfortable in daytime classes with recent high-school graduates may prefer evening or weekend courses in which more adult learners are enrolled. They may also be able to take the math courses at a community college and transfer the credit to a 4-year institution. Some adult learners respond well to on-line courses, some of which allow students to repeat exercises, gain immediate feedback from the computer, and receive on-line tutoring. On-line courses may be particularly useful for those who work alternating shifts. Strongly motivated students might consider earning math credit through CLEP or DANTES Subjects Standardized Tests; however, advisors should make clear which tests are accepted at the student's institution, the resources for test preparation, and the ways to arrange to take the test.

Addressing test anxiety. Adult learners who have not been in school in several years often express extreme anxiety about taking tests. By identifying the mental and physical components of stress, advisors can help students address their test anxiety. If students harbor negative thoughts that interfere with concentration on the test and the recall of learned information, simple techniques to stop those thoughts, such as visualizing success and zooming out to see the bigger picture, can help students focus. Some students also benefit from learning deep breathing and relaxation techniques that they can practice prior to and during tests. Advisors who find that certain students still need help with test anxiety should refer them to the counseling services on campus.

Overcoming fear of technology. Advisors can help those adults who fear technology by determining the individual's skill and experience levels. However, advisors need to understand that advisees may experience feelings of inadequacy and may not admit that they do not know how to use the computer. Therefore, advisors should inquire of adult students about their experiences with technology. They can explain to those reluctant to take relevant computer workshops or courses that many busy adult learners find on-line classes more convenient than traditional classes, and that everyone needs the skills to use the course software, the E-mail system, and the registration procedures on campus.

Members of the Armed Forces

Advisors need to understand the many challenges faced by students in the military. While they work to attain a college education, members of the armed forces may be required to move from one duty location to another or they may be deployed on a military mission. Many reservists and those in

the National Guard assume a dual role of citizen-soldier and have unique needs (Moskos, 2002). Some may experience physical disability as a result of military service. Service members returning from recent deployments may seek mental health services as they acclimate themselves to noncombat conditions (Hoge, Auchterlonie, & Milliken, 2006). Not only should they recognize the challenges of veterans, advisors need to know that spouses and other family members also face unique issues (Dean, 2004).

Colleges and universities located on or near military installations have developed programs, services, and course delivery methods to meet the changing needs of students with military affiliation. Policies differ among institutions regarding the granting of credit for prior military service, life experiences, or distance education. Advisors must clarify these academic policies to students and must familiarize themselves with basic information related to military culture and the types of support service that members and their families may require.

Single Parents

Single parents at the academy can be difficult to identify, but they are a viable and vibrant part of the college culture. They often stretch themselves to their limit by juggling multiple roles as parent, worker, and student, and as a result, they can come under enormous stress. Their responsibilities can be overwhelming, and most advisors can recount advising sessions in which students who are also parents felt the need to decompress. As a result, advisors are also challenged to find the resources, often in the form of support services, to help students meet their educational goals.

Money is usually a perennial problem for single parents. Financial aid, student loans, and grants may not adequately help in a family emergency or financial crisis caused by a child's illness, a broken-down car, or job loss. Child-care expenses contribute to the financial stress, and affordable child care for infants and school-aged children during holidays as well as during evening classes makes enrolling in higher education easier for single parents. Advisors need to share information on child-care options at the college, if available, and in the community.

Many single parents also need health care for themselves and their children. Advisors should share any student health care plans, including well child programs, with adult students. At institutions that do not offer health care, advisors can provide students with a list of health care facilities that offer low cost

or free services in the area.

In addition, advisors might suggest that the student check out community and government agencies, which can provide a host of information and resources about programs (e.g., food stamps and the Women, Infant, and Child program) that can help keep a family healthy. Advisors should be prepared to refer students in emergency situations to low cost legal services, family support groups, church assistance, food banks, and social service agencies equipped to assist them.

While keeping a list of referrals handy, advisors need to remember that this hidden student population may lack an adequate social support network. Facing unique challenges and often socially isolated, single parent students may experience difficulty finding other students who have similar life stories. Advisors can help connect them to other students who are raising children while going to school so they can share, seek advice, and support one another.

Students in Accelerated Programs

Accelerated adult programs are based on the assumption that students have a good deal of life experience and that school is just one of several main priorities in a student's life. Students need to understand how their prior learning experience will impact their learning decisions and how they will fit school into their current lives.

Accelerated programs for adult students vary greatly. Formats range from those with very structured and tightly scheduled requirements that leave little decision making to the student to highly individualized programs that offer students flexibility and responsibility for selecting topics and setting timetables. The more flexibility available to them, the more students need advising support.

Some institutions grant academic credit for previous life and work experience based upon an assessment of experiential learning done at the institution or by external assessors. The evaluator assesses the experiential learning in terms of particular course requirements and compares the student's experience to learning experiences found on the course syllabus or to broader competence areas that represent knowledge and skill areas developed through the program. In some cases, students develop a portfolio of their experiences with documentation that verifies the experience, research that ties theory to the application of the experience, an assessment of the learning outcomes, and an explanation of how the experience applies to the particular requirement.

The more flexibility available to them, the more students need advising support.

Table 2 List of assessor organizations

ACE: American Council on Education www.acenet.edu
ACT: American College Test www.act.org/
CAEL: Council for Adults & Experiential Learning www.cael.org/
CLEP: College Level Examination Program www.collegeboard.com
PONSI: Program on Noncollegiate Sponsored Instruction www.nationalponsi.org/
SAT: Scholastic Aptitude Test www.collegeboard.com

The assessor organization recommends granting college credit for the students who have completed the requirements they have assessed, but the individual college still decides whether or not to accept the credit. See Table 2 for a list of organizations that offer credit by examination.

Advisors need to help adult learners find a good fit with the program options offered at the institution. Many adults who seek out accelerated degree programs have unrealistic expectations of the requirements to complete these degrees. For example, when they focus on completing their degrees quickly, they often have not considered other factors that will contribute to their success and program completion. Advisors need to address the following questions with students considering accelerated programs:

- Does the program have the proper accreditation to support the student's learning goals?
- Does the student have an appropriate career goal that matches the program objectives?
- Does the student's life and work schedule allow attendance at all required class meetings?
- Is the student academically prepared for the rigor of the program?
- Does the student have the prerequisites required to begin the program?
- Does the student have the financial resources to complete the program quickly?
- Does the student's learning style match the format of the program?
- Does the student understand all the program requirements?

The Program for Accelerated College Education (PACE) at California State University, East Bay, provides an academic program for working adults to complete their bachelor's degrees and academic advising to support the needs of these reentry students.

See the Exemplary Practice for the PACE program at the end of this chapter.

Learners in Distance or Internet Degree Programs

The population of distance-learning students continues to grow. Thirty-three percent of those taking their complete academic program on-line are over the age of 24 years. "Characteristics associated with family responsibilities (such as being independent, older, married, or having dependents) were associated with higher participation in distance education," (Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, 2003). As the adult distance-learner population grows, so too does the need for on-line support for these students. A comprehensive adult-services Web site can provide information to students that can be updated and accessed 24 hours a day. The frequently asked questions (FAQs) component of these Web information centers can meet the needs of the adult learners on a variety of schedules.

Adults appreciate finding information on the issues that concern them in a clear and concise presentation, such as through bulleted text or abbreviated passages that can be quickly scanned. However, specific advising Web sites should provide detailed information in printable formats to allow adult learners to get the information they need for later viewing. The most helpful types on digital bulletin boards include important dates and deadlines related to registration drops and adds, tuition payments, exam schedules, major and minor declarations, and graduation applications. In addition, these sites should provide access to policies and procedures related to class participation requirements, application and approval processes for special programs and study abroad options, the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) regulations, plagiarism, and academic integrity guidelines. Students need the on-line ability to submit specific forms, register, take placement tests and needs assessments, and schedule appointments as well as obtain information on degree audits and transfer equivalency, new student orientation, library services, career planning, and financial aid. Students also need a person to contact for assistance when they cannot find answers to their questions on-line.

The academic advisor often becomes the face of the institution for those on campus and the voice for distance learners. The student may contact the advisor for anything related to their college experience, not only academic questions, but problems with computer software, tutoring needs, concerns with the faculty, personal problems, time management issues,

financial aid issues, job opportunities, and career advice. Advisors communicating through distance sessions must ensure that both parties understand one another. Advisors addressing students on-line may be tempted to focus only on the immediate needs of the student rather than on a more comprehensive and holistic assessment of the student's interests and goals. However, advisor commitment to making personal connections with these students can make all the difference in retaining them.

DePaul University has an exemplary program for advising students enrolled in alternative programs specifically designed for adult learners: School for New Learning. See the Exemplary Practice for this DePaul program at the end of this chapter.

It also offers the Chronic Illness Initiative (www.snل.depaul.edu/current/chronic.asp), which provides flexibility for students with chronic illnesses such as chronic fatigue syndrome, rheumatoid arthritis, lupus, cancer, and heart disease.

The University of Southern Maine provides an extensive on-line training for advisors and administrators called "advising students at a distance." For more information go to www.usm.maine.edu/asd/index.htm.

Assessing the Advising of Adult Learners

How do advisors know if they have accomplished their advising goals and met the needs of adult learners? Information about adult learner knowledge about advising, their practices in utilizing advising services, and their perceptions about the services received contributes to service-improvement efforts. In particular, learner feedback will help ensure that students receive services they need to succeed and that staff secure greater attention, funding, or other resources for advising.

Because institutions have different missions and goals, the advising function and related assessments will differ as well. Each institution needs to tie its assessment to the vision, mission, goals, and objectives of the advising program. To get the desired information about the adult learners' experiences with the advising program, the designers of the assessment will need to alter the instruments that have been used for gathering information from traditional students. For example, administrators need to consider that many adult learners attend college part-time, and even those who attend classes full-time may need to stop out for one semester or more to handle work or family demands. As a result, adult students may adopt a different means than will their traditional-aged peers for determining the acceptable time needed to graduate. Assessment

designers also need to include some other unique inquiries when developing an assessment for adult students, such as

- How well do the adult learners understand the impact of school on their family life?
- Do they know how to access advisors and do they do so?
- Do they understand financial aid, and have they used it successfully?
- Do they appreciate the liberal arts?
- Are those with fewer credits or unprepared in math likely to be successful at a particular college or in a particular major?
- What are the characteristics necessary for a student to be successful in an on-line program?

The DePaul School for New Learning undergoes an assessment process for the advising program that includes advising surveys to individual students at key stages of their programs plus other surveys on an annual schedule. It also participated in the 2002 national study of 27 adult education colleges conducted by the Council of Adult and Experiential Learning and found that its program had the highest level of satisfaction with life and career planning.

Conclusion

All adults are jugglers. They live busy lives, balancing the responsibilities of home, family, work, and social activities, but those who choose to pursue higher education complicate their lives even further. Advisors of adult learners need to paint a picture that not only provides direction toward their goals but motivates students to continue their pursuit. Table 3 summarizes the key responsibilities that advisors have toward adult learners and Table 4 offers specific suggestions for helping adult students.

The NACADA Commission on Advising Adult Learners seeks to serve the needs of all advisors who work with adult learners. Advisors who want more information should consult the Web site, which includes a comprehensive resource list, at www.nacada.ksu.edu/Commissions/C01/resources.htm. Additional information is available at www.nacada.ksu.edu/Commissions/C01/leadership.htm. The listserve for the Commission, www.nacada.ksu.edu/Commissions/C01/listserve.htm, is another great place for advisors to get answers to questions about their work with adult learners.

Advisors are encouraged to share their experiences helping adult learners by making presentations

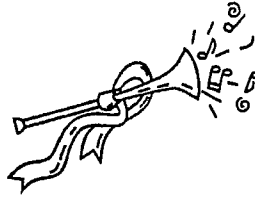
at NACADA regional conferences. The body of information about advising adult learners will continue to grow as advisors contribute their insights and experiences.

Table 3 Advisor responsibilities to adult learners

Acknowledge difficulties in acclimating to and completing school activities
 Assess and address anxiety issues for returning adult learners
 Assign research, decision-making, and academic development tasks
 Assist in identifying obstacles and solutions for success
 Clearly communicate deadlines and important dates
 Help students set realistic expectations and goals for themselves
 Make referrals to assist in holistic needs and development
 Provide encouragement and examples of how to approach learning tasks
 Recommend long-range planning (not simply plans for the next term)
 Schedule the next appointment before the student leaves
 Stay in touch and help formulate a return plan for students that must stop out

Table 4 Suggestions for helping adult learners

Register early and purchase learning materials immediately to review before classes start
 Map out the entire term on calendars immediately after registration
 Schedule all learning activities (not only class) including library, writing, study, and so forth
 Schedule alone time and minimize distractions to concentrate on course work
 Reevaluate schedule periodically; check if priorities have changed
 Incorporate learning activities into daily routine
 Share learning activities with family, friends, and fellow students
 Maintain a healthy diet and exercise program
 Limit but maximize holidays and recreational activities
 Take courses with friends and colleagues when possible
 Network with other students
 Assess academic workload according to schedule and abilities
 Adjust to school slowly: establish skills, routines, and habits before enhancing schedule
 Attend year round, if possible; stopping out summers or other times can result in lost momentum
 Apply successful strategies learned in the workplace to school work
 Plan ahead for particularly difficult assignments, courses, or projects
 Tape lectures and listen to them while exercising or driving
 Ask for help when necessary from family, friends, instructors, and advisors
 Enroll in courses that must be repeated before taking new courses

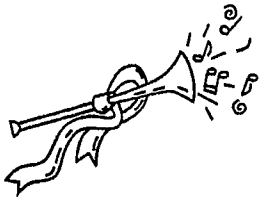


EXEMPLARY PRACTICE

NACADA recognizes outstanding programs for advisors and encourages adaptation of the innovative ideas and approaches shared here to other campus settings.

Selection criteria:

- Programs selected represent a variety of institutional sizes and types.
- Programs represent various models of advising delivery.
- Selected programs serve one of the following special student populations: adults; students who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer (LGBTQ); those from ethnic or racial minority groups; students in academic jeopardy; undecided undergraduates; and students attending or transferring from community colleges.
- Additional students not in the special population served by the program are described in the Exemplary Practice write-up.
- Exemplary Practice programs are based on advising-delivery objectives that are consistent with mission, history, and organizational structure of the institution and unit.
- Programs selected as exemplary provide evidence of effectiveness in meeting program objectives.
- Strengths and challenges for the advising program are identified.
- Original documents from the chosen program that further demonstrate the practices are provided.



EXEMPLARY PRACTICES

Program:

Online Orientation and Directed Self-placement:
Help for the Adult Learner

Institution:

Governors State University

Contact Information:

Kelly McCarthy
Director of Student Development
k-mccarthy@govst.edu
(708) 235-3966

Becky Nugent
Writing Center Coordinator
b-nugent@govst.edu
(708) 235-2105

1 University Parkway
University Park, IL 60466

Institutional Information:

- 2-year, public, upper division, commuter university
- Open admissions university with many competitive graduate programs
- 6,000 undergraduate and graduate students
- 42% are minorities
- 45% receive financial aid
- Students are adults entering the university with 60 hours of earned college credit or an associate's degree from one of five regional community colleges
- Average student age is 34 years
- 71% of female students hold either a full-time job or several part-time jobs
- The first doctoral program in the university's history will be offered in physical therapy beginning in the fall 2007 trimester

Program History:

Students entering Governors State University have completed their general education requirements in writing and mathematics. Many of these students, however, are not prepared to pass junior- and senior-level writing and math courses for several reasons, such as having stopped out of higher

education for a long time. Therefore, all incoming undergraduates are required to take proficiency examinations in math and writing. Based on results of these exams, students could be required to take a writing course or basic math workshops, which are similar to zero courses at a community college.

Students were extremely resistant to taking the required proficiency exams. Those students whose scores forced them to register for the writing course or basic math workshops were disgruntled and resentful. Students were angry. Staff members responsible for administering the exams were frustrated. In addition, not many people in the university believed these exams determined if adult students were proficient in writing and math.

Program Description:*Objectives*

The undergraduate program that Governors State has developed for advising adult learners is called Online Orientation (OO) with Directed Self-placement (DSP). Based on the work of Royer and Gilles (1998), "Directed Self-Placement: An Attitude of Orientation," the programs are designed according to the basic premise that students are intelligent and responsible enough to make honest, adult decisions about their educational choices when given the appropriate information.

Overall, OO/DSP gets students the help they need, and most important, maintains their dignity in the process. The primary objective of the OO/DSP is to direct adult learners in making appropriate choices about supplemental course work in math and writing. Upholding institutional responsibility for learning, while holding students accountable for their educational choices, is another objective of the program.

Advising

- Once undergraduates are accepted into the university, they are instructed to access and complete the OO/DSP program before they register.
- The orientation portion guides students through basic university information, practices, and policies.
- The DSP portion consists of two instruments. The first is a self-inventory and the second is

a multiple-choice skills assessment. Students are then instructed about the writing that will be required in their course work and given a student-written sample paper to read.

- For math, students complete the same types of instruments and are given information about the math courses required for their major field.
- Students complete OO/DSP on a computer, and their rankings from the instruments are automatically scored.
- Next, students are led to a recommended decision based on their scores.
- In the end, however, students themselves decide whether or not to enroll in a supplemental writing or math course.

Program Strengths and Challenges:

Strengths:

At first, student reviews were highly enthusiastic about the changes initiated in the testing program. However, as student memory of the old proficiency system faded, their enthusiasm toward OO/DSP waned.

The responses in the student evaluation section at the end of OO/DSP remain favorable. Some comments from the evaluation include: "Keep up the excellent and innovative approaches to making this process easier," and "With my busy work schedule I appreciate the University offering such a convenient program, an alternative to the traditional college orientation."

The number of students who enroll in the writing course (English 301), as recommended by DSP score results, has remained about the same: 657 students of 4,694 made the decision to take English 301 (14% of all students) (data from May 2003 to February 2006). Based on a comparison of current data to that from 2000 through 2002, which showed that 2,644 took the writing exam and 62 students enrolled in English 301 (2.5% of all students), the opinion that students would not respond positively to the self-placement requirement changes was dispelled.

Challenges:

Most of the university's advisors do not use OO/DSP when advising students in part because of disparate methods of advising throughout the different colleges, programs, and divisions. Of the four colleges in the university, only Business and Public Administration as well as those in the School of Interdisciplinary Learning use professional advisors, who use the OO/DSP data and lead students into the supplemental courses and workshops as needed. The College of Health Professions and Arts

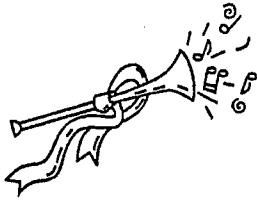
and Sciences use faculty members as advisors, who typically do not use the OO/DSP data.

Advisor support for DSP is a critical component of the program. Because students make their own decisions, the opportunity to discuss their choice can either solidify that choice or convince a student that seeking help is a good idea. All of the university's advisors, whether professional or faculty, should access student DSP data and use them at the first advising session because the information is critical in the development of academic study plans.

In addition, the original plan for OO/DSP relied on a required writing, information, and technology course that each student takes during the first term of classes. This requirement, however, has yet to be implemented; it is the final step necessary for the complete success of OO/DSP.

Possible Solutions:

Aware of the above-named challenges, a newly created DSP Advisory Board made up of numerous stakeholders within the university will begin to tackle these tough issues. This board will communicate with faculty advisors. With communication and caring as key elements, tools for advisors will help them guide students to the best education possible.



EXEMPLARY PRACTICES

Program:

Program for Accelerated College Education
(PACE)

Institution:

California State University, East Bay (CSUEB)

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Institutional Information:

- 4-year public
- 3 San Francisco Bay Area locations: a main campus in Hayward with satellite in Concord and established partnership with Contra Costa College, San Pablo
- Offers bachelor's degrees and over 30 master's degrees
- 13,000 students
- Comprised of a majority of minorities, CSUEB is one of the most diverse in the California State University system, reflecting the cultural, ethnic, and economic diversity of the San Francisco Bay Area
- 375 PACE program participants
- 35 to 45 years old on average

- 80% women
- 75% people of color

Advising Delivery:

As a program office, The Program for Accelerated College Education (PACE) at California State University, East Bay, (CSUEB) is staffed with a director, an assistant director who is also the advisor of all PACE students, and an office manager. The PACE advisor is dedicated to advising only PACE students on their major and general education requirements. The PACE advisor's main office is on the Hayward campus, but this person also travels weekly to Concord and San Pablo to provide advising to PACE students taking classes at those locations. Advising is accomplished mainly through one-on-one appointments. To accommodate the working-student population, most appointments are in the late afternoon and early evening. Phone appointments can be made for those students who are unable to meet with the advisor during regular office hours. E-mail advising is available for matters that can be effectively addressed on-line. While they may drop in the office for advising, most PACE students prefer the certainty of a scheduled appointment. The PACE advisor also sends out frequent announcements and updates via the Blackboard Learning system to stay in touch with students and keep them informed of important dates, upcoming events, matters of interest.

Feedback indicates that students appreciate this regular communication from the PACE Office; it builds a strong sense of support from the university. As evidenced by a retention rate of 70% for the PACE program, the strong and consistent advisor-student interaction throughout the course of the educational experience encourages greater persistence to a degree and helps to ensure successful and efficient progress through the program.

Pre-admission advising is also available for potential transfer students. The assistant director works closely with the 11 community colleges within the CSUEB service area, meeting with the counseling departments regularly to discuss articulation agreements to provide updates on any curriculum changes and to build the positive relationships that promote successful transfers. In

addition, inquiries from community college counselors and prospective students are always welcome to ensure a smooth transition as students complete lower-division and tackle upper-division course work.

Program Description:

PACE is designed specifically for working adults, enabling them to complete their undergraduate education while balancing the demands of a full-time job and a family. PACE has a two-fold mission at CSUEB. First, it provides a carefully constructed academic curriculum that allows students to make accelerated progress toward completing their bachelor's degrees in human development, liberal studies, or leadership in hospitality and leisure services. Second, it provides academic advising and administrative support exclusively to meet the special needs of PACE students, who are reentering the academy.

Typical PACE students have completed their first 2 years of postsecondary education at a community college and subsequently transfer to CSUEB to complete their degree. Students who are admitted into the program with all entry requirements met, including sufficient transfer units, can complete their bachelor's degree in a minimum of seven 10-week quarters.

Through collaboration with the departments and faculty members teaching PACE classes, the curriculum for each major has been created with a carefully structured course sequence, a flexible method of delivery (which may include course materials on video and on-line), and course offerings exclusively at night and on Saturdays. Through the use of a special student registration code, PACE students are given first priority in registering for classes in this curriculum, thereby ensuring that these working adults get the classes they need each quarter.

PACE serves its adult working population by providing a sense of belonging that is often lacking in the educational experience of reentry students. This objective is accomplished in multiple ways. The program is based on a cohort model wherein students progress through the curriculum as a group. Attending classes with a cohort of like-minded individuals provides an element of support rarely available to non-traditional students. Study buddies and groups often form and last for the duration of the program.

The consistency offered when a student is assigned to a specific advisor and their frequent communications also provides stability and predictability. In addition to the distinction the student acquires through their major department, the steady advising relationship helps students further

establish their identities in the college. The ongoing advising relationship helps these nontraditional students to identify themselves as members of the university community at large, having the same rights, privileges, and responsibilities as the traditional students. PACE student activities and events also help create the sense of community. For example, each year orientation sessions are conducted just for PACE students. In addition, at the end of the year during the PACE Student Recognition Ceremony the university community is invited to join with the PACE Office to celebrate and recognize the achievements and accomplishments of PACE students who will graduate, the PACE Osher Reentry Scholars, and the PACE Teacher of the Year.

The PACE program also serves students offering the Osher Reentry Scholarships. Initially PACE was awarded a grant by the Bernard Osher Foundation for \$50,000 to provide 25 scholarships of equal value during the 2005-2006 academic year. The initial Osher Foundation scholarship program was based on an award of three interim grants, and if the program were successful, it would be invited to apply for a \$1,000,000 endowment in 2008-2009. However, the Osher Foundation was so impressed with the quality of the PACE program that it decided to award the endowment without further delay in 2006-2007. As a result, the PACE program at CSUEB now has a permanent scholarship fund for reentry PACE students, which communicates unequivocally that PACE students have partners in the community committed to supporting and improving their education journeys. These students are called the Osher Reentry Scholars.

Program Evaluation:

When the PACE program was created 15 years ago, the university established the PACE Advisory Board, consisting of one faculty member from each college nominated by the dean of that college, to broadly oversee and provide counsel to the director of the program. The PACE Advisory Board is chaired by the Associate Vice President of Academic Programs and Graduate Studies, which is the unit that houses the PACE program. Any major policy decisions are made by the Provost's Council, which consists of the college deans and other major Academic Affairs administrators. For example, if PACE wanted to establish a new partnership to offer the program on another community college campus, the first step would be a presentation and discussion with the PACE Advisory Board. If it approved the plan, this proposal would then move on to the Provost's Council which would make the final decision.

Annually, the PACE Office conducts student satisfaction surveys to evaluate the quality of the advising and administrative services. Many improvements have been made in the administration of the program based on feedback from the students. During the 2006-2007 academic year, the Director and Assistant Director of PACE will be working closely with the department chairs in Liberal Studies and Human Development to update the curriculum to reflect changes in the majors offered in these departments.

Overall, PACE judges its success based on feedback, such as the following from students and faculty:

- PACE student Mitsuko Crawford stated, "I think the PACE Program is the best reentry college program for working adults. . . . The biggest obstacle in going back to college for most people is fear. The PACE program tackles that hurdle by the solid structure of the program and accessible counselors."
- From the faculty perspective, Professor Mike Contino said, "I really like teaching in the PACE Program. . . . I have even established ongoing relationships with some of the students, which is rare in the traditional university setting."
- The PACE Teacher of the Year for 2006, Terry Wilson, said teaching in the PACE Program is "exhilarating" and that the students "have a level of enthusiasm and commitment that . . . adds a dimension that is not there in classes taught during regular business hours."

Program Strengths and Challenges:

Strengths:

There are several identifiable strengths to the PACE program. It is student centered and designed to meet the needs of this very special and often overlooked population. PACE prides itself on being convenient for students while maintaining the academic quality and integrity of the program. It allows a full-time working student to progress toward a bachelor's degree within a reasonable time while still able to balance life outside of work and school. Attending classes with a cohort of like-minded individuals offers a unique sense of belonging to reentry students.

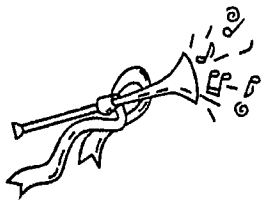
The Osher Reentry Scholarship enhances the program in several ways. The financial support often enables Osher Reentry Scholars to finish their degrees without delay because they do not need to work and save money for tuition. Furthermore, as Lorraine Snowden, a recent Osher Reentry Scholar wrote, the scholarship "offers hope, a vote of confidence, a gentle push to go on, optimism to succeed and certainly

the pride of knowing that someone believes in me." Through the Osher Foundation, PACE students clearly have a great partner in the community.

Consistent advising and administrative support in which students can get answers to general questions and help with problem solving are the essential foundations for the success of the program.

Challenges:

The greatest challenges for the program include enhancing the visibility of the program in the Bay Area and encouraging enrollment. Through direct mail campaigns, newspaper advertising, informational meetings for students, and counselors at local community colleges to promote the program, PACE has seen enrollment increase, but not at a sufficient rate. Therefore, this academic year the PACE Office has worked even more closely with the university's Marketing Communication Department and the faculty on the PACE Advisory Board to improve visibility and recruitment of new students.



EXEMPLARY PRACTICES

Program:

School for New Learning (SNL)

Institution:

DePaul University

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Institutional Information:

- Private, Catholic
- 3 locations in downtown Chicago and 3 suburban campuses
- Bachelor's and master's degrees granted
- Distance learning offered
- 2,000 students in SNL
- 23,500 students in DePaul
- A diverse population of local commuters as well as national and international distance-education students
- Student minimum age, 24 years; average age, 39 years
- 70% female
- 80% have prior college
- 90% work full-time and attend part-time
- 30% are minority students

Advising Delivery:

The School for New Learning (SNL) advising system is unique due in large part to the design of the program and the support system that is necessary to facilitate the individualized, competence-based, adult-learning format. Ongoing training and development of advising staff is a key element in the successful functioning of the SNL advising system. Automation of university systems and the implementation of distance learning courses and advising have created unique challenges that have

benefited students on campus as well as those on-line. Communication is performed through

- E-mail,
- telephone,
- video conferencing,
- Web sites,
- discussion forums,
- listservs, and
- information shared on compact discs.

Advisors use these methods of communication with distance students from around the country and the world as well as with those in the Chicago area.

Program History:

The School of New Learning (SNL) was established in 1972 to offer alternative programs designed especially for adult learners. Key characteristics of the original program design were that the curriculum be individualized and competence based to offer a variety of flexible learning methods and formats as well as credit for experiential learning. Each of these factors has created a great need for academic advising at different stages and offerings by a variety of diverse individuals. The advising system has grown to include:

- 4 full-time and 10 part-time advisors who serve current and prospective students through the SNL Advising Center for all general needs.
- 32 resident faculty members who serve as advising mentors for students with general curriculum issues.
- a network of over 500 working professionals who advise students on career and academic goals in their programs.

Program Description:

SNL staff use a holistic approach to advising that involves different individuals advising each student at certain points in the program. Among these are the professional advising staff, the faculty mentors, and the career advisors. While each of these groups have overlapping responsibilities in terms of disseminating information to students regarding program options, registration issues, policies and procedures, they each serve unique roles as well. A more detailed description can be found in Table 5.

Table 5 SNL advising system staff and responsibilities

School for New Learning Advising System		
SNL Advising Center (Full- and Part-time Staff)	Resident Faculty Mentors (Academic Committee)	Career Focus Area Advisors (Academic Committee)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recruits and advises prospective students • Teaches Learning Assessment Seminar course • Conducts admissions process • Assists academic committees • Conducts graduation checks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teaches Foundations of Adult Learning course • Approves placement of transfer courses • Assesses experiential learning • Assists development of student learning plan • Monitors academic progress 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chosen by student, approved by resident faculty mentor • Guides student's career development research • Recommends career learning activities • Assesses career-related experiential learning • Approves career-related courses and projects

SNL Advising Staff

SNL Advising Center staff. The professional advisors are not assigned caseloads, but serve students directly as well as assist the resident faculty mentors and career focus area advisors in student academic committees. The advisors in the SNL Advising Center are involved in processing requests for information and providing services on a daily basis from a prospect's first inquiry to graduation. The Advising Center offers services at four campuses during day, evening, and weekend schedules by appointment, on campus and by telephone, and offers advising services at a distance through E-mail, teleconferencing, and discussion boards.

Resident faculty mentors. Resident faculty mentors advise as one of their key responsibilities and part of their academic load. Resident faculty mentors are important in guiding the student's academic development and lifelong learning skills. This person is the student's main link to the college, and the relationship between the student and mentor has a significant impact on student success. At times, the mentor is an advocate, a collaborator, a copy editor, a sounding board, a motivator, a disciplinarian, and a friend. The mentor is a key member in the student's academic committee and is responsible for monitoring the student's progress and the academic standards of the individualized learning plan.

Career focus area advisors. Career focus area advisors are generally not DePaul employees but have been chosen by the students to assist them with the aspects of their programs that relate to career preparation and planning. The career focus area advisors are working professionals with advanced degrees and significant experience in their fields. Students can develop a focus area related to any career or academic goal and select these work-

ing professionals to assist them with career preparation through real world experiences and academic projects and courses.

Stages in the SNL Advising System

Prospective student advising. Three basic stages mark student's progress through the SNL advising system. The first stage begins before the student is admitted to the program. While most college advisors only work with students once admitted to the college, at SNL the Advising Center staff advisors serve an active recruiting role. They

- attend college fairs and open houses,
- provide weekly information sessions,
- respond to inquiries by telephone and E-mail, and
- meet with prospective students and perform transcript analysis.

These advisors spend a good deal of their time attracting adult learners to the college.

SNL admissions advising. The second stage of the advising process involves a rather extensive admissions process. Students apply to the program and are given a conditional admissions status. Next, they take a course called Learning Assessment Seminar (LAS) that is followed by an admissions interview with a SNL Advising Center advisor. The LAS course is a structured experiential learning seminar for returning adults that prepares them to develop their individualized learning plans in the college and assesses their readiness to begin the program. The LAS course is taught by SNL advisors and faculty members and includes an assessment of the student's academic skills and an orientation to the college and university processes.

Student academic committee. The third stage of the advising process involves establishing the student's academic committee, which consists of the resident faculty mentor and the career focus area advisor. In addition, students have the option to select a peer advisor to assist in decision making and review of committee proposals. The committee assists the student in identifying the relevant learning goals, needs, and experiences that will be included in the learning plan.

Student learning plans. The development of the learning plan begins with an assessment of prior learning experiences, both from formal classroom settings and those gained from the workplace, the student's personal life, and training or learning achieved from volunteer activities as well as involvement in organizations or other nontraditional learning environments. After assessing prior learning, the committee turns to the student's learning goals and seeks the most appropriate learning activities to accomplish these goals including SNL courses, new experiential projects, courses from other DePaul colleges, and career-related training and development.

SNL Degree Steps

1. Learning Assessment Seminar. In the Learning Assessment Seminar, the student is introduced to the program and guided through a self-assessment process that helps the student clarify his or her learning needs and goals.
2. Admissions. After completion of the Learning Assessment Seminar and submission of college transcripts, the student has an admissions interview with an academic advisor and told the next steps in the process.
3. Foundations of Adult Learning course. In the Foundations of Learning course, the student completes an in-depth analysis of her or his learning goals, experiences, styles, and preferences as well as develops an individualized learning plan.
4. First committee meeting. The first committee meeting marks the end of the planning process for the degree. While the learning plan is flexible and can be revised later, the student has a clear picture his or her learning activities and degree requirements at this meeting.
5. Developmental learning activities. The student develops college level competencies and learning skills such as writing and analytical and critical thinking skills, as well as an understanding of research methods and basic competencies required for advancement in the student's chosen career area.

6. Midpoint program review. The midpoint program review is an opportunity for the student and her or his advisors to review the student's accomplishments in preparation for more advanced learning activities related to lifelong learning skills, the liberal arts, and the student's chosen career area.
7. Advanced learning activities. Advanced learning activities include advanced courses and projects that involve synthesis of theory, experience, practice, research, systems, and applications of learning that prepare students to continue their studies in the graduate programs, corporate training, and professional development activities that characterize lifelong learning.
8. Final committee meeting. The final gathering of the student's academic committee serves as a checkpoint to verify that the student has completed all the required competencies to qualify for graduation.
9. Summit Seminar. The Summit Seminar course marks the conclusion of the student's academic activities in the program. The seminar is an opportunity for students to reflect on their learning experiences, share learning accomplishments with fellow students, and consider the steps to take after completing their programs.
10. Graduation. The University conducts a graduation ceremony once a year in June at a Chicago area location. Students who have completed their programs during the previous academic year and distance learning students are welcome to attend the June ceremony.

Program Evaluation:

The college administers advising surveys to individual students at several key stages of their programs. In addition, other surveys are completed on an annual schedule. Results have indicated that SNL students seem very satisfied with advising: The mean score for SNL students was 3.88 on a 4.00 scale for satisfaction with advising. The positive indicators provided by students in the internal assessment match the positive evaluation provided by a national study. A 2002 national study of 27 adult education colleges by the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) found that SNL had the highest level of student satisfaction with life and career planning. SNL advising was rated highly in the *ACT Academic Advising Survey*, as reported in the *ACT Executive Summary* of September 2,

2003 found at <http://oipr.depaul.edu/surveys/actsurvey/ACTSurvey.asp>. The responses to the question "How well does the advising meet your needs?" are as follows: *Very Poorly*, 0.0%; *Less than Adequately*, 9.6%; *Adequately*, 44.2%; *More than Adequately*, 30.8%; *Exceptionally well*: 15.4%. The top five categories of satisfaction with SNL advisors were the following:

- Improving my study skills and habits, 100%;
- Scheduling and registration procedures, 95.7%;
- Dropping and adding courses, 92.3%;
- Selecting and changing my major of study, 90.9%;
- My academic progress, 90.3%.

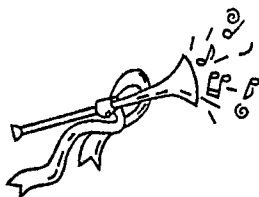
Program Strengths and Challenges:

Strengths:

Advising at SNL is done in partnership with students rather than using an authoritative style. This partnership has been found to be successful with adult learners and encourages motivation of the students. Preparing answers to commonly asked questions and then tailoring those responses to individual student needs is a practice that works well with the college's adult learners. Whether in E-mail, telephone, information sessions, or in personal interviews, advisors who are prepared with well-developed explanations and descriptions of the general student experience have been an essential component to clarify the complex nature of the SNL program to prospects and seasoned students. SNL advisors frame their communications with students in adult learning theory as they articulate the process and procedures of the program. When adult learners understand the theory and implications of their learning decisions, they focus more easily on the tasks of research, planning, and decision making.

Challenges:

Attempting to communicate the complex nature of the SNL competence system is an advising challenge because students are more familiar with traditional program models. Therefore, the SNL advising staff provides as much information as possible to students in several different formats. This approach allows advisors to orient and guide students before and after their interactions with advisors. As a result, advisor-student interactions can be focused as much as possible on the student's individual situation.



EXEMPLARY PRACTICES

Program:

Brigham Young University (BYU) Bachelor of General Studies (BGS)

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Institutional Information:

- Private, faith-based university
- Located in Provo, Utah
- 30,000 on-campus students
- Offers undergraduate, master's, and doctorate degrees

Program Description:

Brigham Young University (BYU) created the Bachelor of General Studies (BGS) program for former BYU students who left the university without completing their degree and have been away for at least 2 years. Through the BGS program, these former students are now able to complete a bachelor's degree from home primarily by utilizing courses from the nationally recognized BYU Independent Study program.

Student ages currently range from 22 to 80 years. To date, the oldest student graduated in August 2006 at the age of 85 years. The average age is 40 years with 87% being female. Although the BGS advisement office is located in Provo, Utah, the students live throughout the United States, with a handful living overseas. Over 2,000 students are currently served in the program with approximately 200 more working on the application process. The program was

implemented in September 1998, and as of December 2006, a total of 449 students had graduated.

Students participate in the BGS program for various reasons, namely to a) receive a sense of accomplishment in completing a lifelong goal, b) advance their careers, or c) move on to graduate-level programs. Many want to set a good example for their children by showing that education is important. Because the program is designed for former BYU students who can no longer attend on-campus classes, the BGS slogan has become "Finish at home what you started at BYU."

The BGS Office serves as the students' primary contact from initial inquiry and admission to the program until they are ready to graduate, providing the students with a home base from which to work. When students would be better served by other offices, they are directed accordingly. All questions regarding the application and admission process, transfer credits, the courses needed for graduation, academic advisement, and retention and motivation initiatives are handled by the BGS Office.

The BGS staff consists of the director, a program assistant over marketing and assessment, three full-time advisors, and one part-time advisor. Students are invited to visit the office any time without an appointment during regular office hours. However, because most of the students do not live in the area, they receive advisement primarily through E-mail, phone, and mail.

The major for all students in the BGS program is general studies. Students also choose one of eight areas of emphasis from the following: American studies, English and American literature, family history, family life, history, management, psychology, and writing. When students apply, their previous BYU and transfer courses are evaluated for fulfillment of current graduation requirements. Even if some courses do not fill specific requirements, they can still be used as overall credit.

Entrance Course

The admission process includes completion of the Student Development (StDev) 100 course. StDev 100 is a BYU Independent Study course specifically written for students entering the BGS program. It helps students get back into study mode and deter-

mine if Independent Study is suitable for them. Many students coming back to school after a long absence feel as if they are too old to learn. Successfully finishing StDev 100 gives them the confidence that they can move forward. The course introduces students to *The Aims of a BYU Education* and then provides instruction and review of important study skills. These lessons include reading comprehension and test-taking strategies, identification of learning style and adaptation to other styles, critical thinking skills, and stress and time management. A critical element of the course is teaching students how to determine which courses are needed to complete degree requirements and prepare an academic plan to graduation. (The course overview can be viewed at <http://ce.byu.edu/is/site/courses/description.cfm?subject=125&course=STDEV100Essential%2520College%2520Skills%2520%2528BGS%2520Edition%2529>.)

Students are sent letters, flyers, and E-mails as reminders to complete StDev 100 by the given deadline. Having a 3- to 6-month deadline for the course has been more effective than the usual 1 year allowed in independent study courses. The shorter time frame works best for keeping students motivated, admitting them into the program, and helping them get started on their other courses. Upon successfully completing StDev 100, students are formally admitted to the program and have a maximum of 8 years to complete all requirements and graduate.

Advisement after Admission

Upon admission, students are sent a notebook with information and reference materials. These materials include the following: an information guide that includes contact information, dates to remember, and other important items; an introduction to the staff; a current graduation progress report; preliminary instructions for the capstone course; information on accessing on-line helps; address change forms; and the latest issue of the newsletter *BGS Update*.

Shortly after formal admission to the program, students receive a phone call from an advisor who inquires about the receipt of the admission packet and responds to any student questions or concerns. Students are once again encouraged to contact the BGS Office at any time and to begin course work immediately.

Each year after admission, students are required to submit an ecclesiastical endorsement and a matriculation fee. Upon receipt of these items, an advisor checks the student's progress according to the academic plan. A letter is sent to the student verifying receipt of payment as well as providing encourage-

ment and including reminders such as when to apply for graduation and noting any changes that are needed in the academic plan.

The *BGS Update*, issued three times a year, is a tool to help motivate students and to keep them informed. *Update* articles recount the experiences of recent BGS graduates or motivational experiences of current students, information on course changes, program reminders, tips (often from other students), a list of recent graduates, and motivational quotes.

One advisor specifically focuses on retention, contacting students who seem to need additional motivation or help. The advisor tracks students' progress and calls them if they have not made much headway in the recent past. The advisor and student talk through problems and challenges the student might be facing and discuss possible solutions.

Through these individual contacts, program stakeholders hope to identify systematic changes that can be implemented to encourage all students. However, experience has shown that lack of progress toward graduation is dependent upon individual circumstances. Although identification and development of initiatives that will benefit all students are the goals, one-on-one contacts may be the best way to help. While most of the time students' specific personal problems are not solvable by the BGS staff, students are grateful that they have been recognized as individuals and that someone has listened to their concerns.

Advisor Training

The BGS Office is staffed with advisors specifically qualified to counsel potential and current students in the BGS program. Because students range in age from 22 to over 80 years, advisor training is vital for successful advising of this diverse adult group. Great care is taken in selecting and hiring advisors who will relate well with the adult BGS students.

A training manual is given to each newly hired advisor. It includes program information, FAQs, instructions on quality customer service, helpful references, and detailed instructions on processes. New employees are carefully guided and taught by other advisors as they learn their duties and begin advising students. They are taught to find out about individual students' interests with regard to degrees and to ask several questions to understand student needs. Excellent customer service is highly emphasized.

In addition, staff meetings assist in ongoing learning and clarifying program changes. Specific training items are addressed during these meetings as needed.

Additional Assistance

The BYU Independent Study courses are offered both on-line and through a traditional paper-and-pencil method with the option of submitting lessons on-line. Therefore, students can choose the format they prefer—traditional or Web based.

Although most students in the program complete their classes by taking Independent Study courses, those who live in the Provo area have the option of taking classes at the BYU Salt Lake Center (45 miles from the main campus) or on-campus during the spring and summer terms. A number of students also choose to leave their families and live in Provo to attend spring and summer terms because they prefer the classroom setting. A gathering is held at the beginning of each term for them and local residents so they can meet the office staff personally, become acquainted with others, and set up study partners. They meet for an hour, have refreshments, introduce themselves, and get to know one another. This meeting helps students realize that they are not alone in this challenging endeavor. Similar gatherings are held at the Salt Lake Center at the beginning of each semester for students attending classes there.

Students are also encouraged to enlist the support of their family and friends. This support helps them to stay motivated, make steady progress, feel good about their efforts, and rid themselves of guilty feelings for spending less time on other commitments. By offering the students support, the family (generally a spouse or parent) also comes to understand that the student's goal is important and that the time spent on attaining it is temporary.

Some students struggle with financing their education in addition to home and family expenses. Because most students take Independent Study courses, they only need to pay for the cost of one or two courses at a time. Therefore, while they are working on one course, they have time to save the money needed for their next course. However, if they qualify, partial federal financial aid is available to BGS students. Also, they may apply for partial-tuition financial assistance through the BGS Office. Generous donations to the BYU Division of Continuing Education enable the BGS department to provide this assistance. Among these donations, special funds are set aside for single parents with dependent children.

Completing the Program

Once students are admitted to the program, they are expected to complete their remaining courses through BYU. Exceptions can be made only for spe-

cial circumstances to fill university core requirements.

To graduate, all students must complete a minimum of 120 credit hours, including at least 40 upper-division credits, general education, religion, emphasis, and general elective requirements. These are the same graduation requirements as required for on-campus degrees.

Once requirements are complete, BGS students are welcomed and encouraged to attend the regular University commencement exercises. They are recognized individually at the college convocations in the college of their emphasis.

Program Evaluation:

The first formal assessment of the BGS program was finalized and administered in late winter 2007 via a survey of BGS graduates. While data are not yet available from the survey, responses in the required capstone course (StDev490) and other abundant anecdotal evidence confirm a high level of student satisfaction with assistance and advisement provided by the BGS Office as well as the program as a whole.

To date, the StDev490 capstone course requires three parts. First, students are asked to analyze how *The Aims of a BYU Education* were met through their studies. Second, they submit a six-page reflective paper regarding their experiences in the program in light of the *Aims*. Third, they provide an evaluation of the capstone experience. The course provides excellent feedback for evaluating the success of the BGS program and it has also proven to be a positive experience and a fitting close to the students' studies.

In brief, the first 400 graduating students have shown the successful integration of the overall *Aims* categories: spiritually strengthening (97.3%), intellectually enlarging (94.0%), character building (95.5%), and encouraging lifelong learning and service (95.9%). Results from the capstone have been published in the *Journal of College and Character* (Howell, Allred, Laws, & Jordan, n.d.). Findings were also presented at the University Continuing Education Association West Region conference in September 2006.

Effective for the Fall 2007 semester, a major change will be made in StDev 490 to provide direct assessment of expanded student learning outcomes. The expanded outcomes are emphasis related and supplement the *BYU Aims* outcomes already being assessed. The learning outcomes and assessment instruments are described at the following Web site: https://learningoutcomes.byu.edu/wiki/index.php/Bachelor_of_General_Studies.

Program Strengths and Challenges:

The major strength of the BGS program is that students can finish their BYU degree from wherever they currently live. This strength also becomes an advisement challenge because the staff never personally meets most of the BGS students. Efforts by the staff are continually being made to help provide a sense of connection and community, but many BGS students still feel they are alone in their efforts. One of these efforts is an on-line BGS student portal that is in the development stages; BGS stakeholders hope it will enhance the sense of community among the students and provide greater access to information and help.