



## Commission for **Adult Learners**

### Annual Report 2018-2019

As the Commission entered its third decade, it continued to study the unique challenges faced by adult learners, as well as the steps the University community may take to engage and to assist these learners. In addition, the Commission continued to advocate for these learners by building awareness through events such as the annual Hendricks Conference.

For 2018-2019, the Commission focused on the topic of retention and persistence as it relates to adult learners at Penn State. More specifically, the Commission conducted a benchmarking study comparing current Penn State adult learner practices to those offered at other Universities, reviewed the factors that impede persistence and retention among adult learners, explored new opportunities for engaging adults in both in and outside of the classroom, and sought opportunities to collaborate with other University stakeholders in order to optimize the adult learner experience.

In line with these goals, four committees were formed: 21<sup>st</sup> Century Access, Adult Learner Engagement, Charting the Course, and Hendrick Award and Conference Planning.

Monthly meetings included conversations with and presentations by various University representatives, including President Eric Barron; Provost Nicholas Jones; Melissa Kunes, Assistant Vice President for Undergraduate Education and Executive Director for Student Aid; Clark Brigger, Assistant Vice President for Undergraduate Education and Executive Director of Undergraduate Admissions; and Penny Carlson, Assistant Vice President and Executive Director for Academic Services and Assessment. Members of the Commission also travelled to Hazleton for the November meeting.

### **Committee Accomplishments**

**21<sup>st</sup> Century Access:** After conducting a review of current student success initiatives at Penn State that apply to adult learners, the committee identified the transfer credit process, limited financial aid options available to part-time students, and class schedules that don't often mesh well with adult student learners, as having negative impact upon retention rates among adult student learners. The committee further found that adult learners often struggle from a perceived sense that they are somehow "different" from traditional-age learners. To assist with this concern, the committee recommended the University work strategically to create additional opportunities for adult learners to participate in activities tailored to address their specific concerns. Suggestions include: 1) update the current adult learner handbook into a more robust

website that provides coordinated information related to adults at Penn State; 2) create a Canvas dashboard for adult learners, and use the space to answer student questions, to share information, and to create community; 3) create a peer resource network that would enable adult learners to seek advice and feedback from trained peer mentors; and 4) build upon the success of the World Campus' *Inside Track* coaching program by offering coaching to all adult learners at Penn State. The committee further recommended that the Commission use in-progress Starfish Intervention Inventories to guide work in this area.

**Adult Learner Engagement:** The committee completed a gap analysis related to adult student learner engagement, and noted the following: Currently only 2.1% of students studying abroad are adults, and these adults are most likely to participate in embedded study abroad experiences. In addition, the committee recommended the creation and development of an engagement pathway for adult learners, with the goal of sharing best practices with academic advisors in hopes that they will include such information during their advising meetings with students. The committee attempted to engage unit Adult Enrollment Coordinators, but found that this network is currently inactive. The committee recommended that in 2019-2020, the Commission work with units to recommend new methods for sharing information pertinent to the adult learner. The committee presented its recommendations during a panel at the Hendrick conference, and suggested directions the Commission for Adult Learners might take next year.

**Charting the Course Task Force:** The committee benchmarked current Penn State practices related to adult learners against programs offered at other colleges and Universities. To date the committee has surveyed information on adult learners available on other Big 10 institution websites and has drafted a series of follow-up questions that they will use to gather additional data regarding adult learner practices at peer institutions. The committee presented its findings at the Hendrick conference, where it too identified the need for a central website where adult learners could locate the services relevant to a majority of the demographic, as well as the need for more robust peer mentoring to be made available to students. The committee also recommended that the University work within the Big 10 alliance to create a new, collaborative consortium focused on identifying adult learner needs as well as the creation of support mechanisms for these students.

**Hendrick Award and Conference Planning:** The committee planned a conference focused on the topic of adult student learner persistence and retention. Goldie Blumenstyk, Senior Writer, *The Chronicle for Higher Education*, was invited to offer the keynote address. Over two hundred Penn State faculty and staff attended breakout sessions focused on such topics as best practices for working with adult students with disabilities, engaging adults through on-campus and co-curricular experiences, support initiatives for the recruitment and retention of adult learners, and mentoring of military students. The event include an adult student learner panel, as well as a Commonwealth Chancellor panel in which campus Chancellors discussed their efforts in support of recruitment and retention at their campuses. The event also recognized this year's Shirley

Hendrick Award recipient, Dr. Antone Aboud, who is professor of practice in the College of the Liberal Arts and director of online programs for the School of Labor and Employment Relations. Dr. Aboud presented a session at the Hendrick Conference. His breakout session "Promoting Student Engagement," shared information regarding his efforts to create international study abroad experiences that were tailored to the needs and interests of the adult learner.

The nominating committee, chaired by outgoing chair Jamie Campell, received two nominations for the position of chair-elect for 2020-2021. After an election was held, Brian Redmond, Teaching Professor of Labor and Employment Relations and lead faculty member for Organization Leadership, was named chair-elect for 2019-2020.

As suggested in the above summary, the Commission has identified several opportunities for next year, having identified several areas where the University might enhance how it communicates with adult learners regarding services and opportunities available to them. Additionally, the Commission has proposed that a more robust peer tutoring network might assist with recruitment and retention. The Commission has also proposed that the University consider working with other BIG 10 schools to create consortium in support of the adult learner.

As this year comes to a close, I offer my gratitude to all the Commission members and sponsors for their work in support of the adult learner this year. Finally, I would be remiss if I did not offer special thanks to Judy Wills and Chaustin Anderson for their tireless support of the Commission, its sponsors, and its members.

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