

2003 National Adult Learner Satisfaction-Priorities Report

Study Conducted by Noel-Levitz and CAEL

Rationale for Satisfaction Measurement

Student satisfaction studies are self-examinations that enable institutions to measure their students' satisfaction with a wide range of college experiences. By taking "soundings" of student satisfaction, institutions are able to pinpoint their institutional strengths as well as areas in need of improvement.

Traditionally, colleges and universities have measured one dimension of student satisfaction only. However, for greatest and accuracy, satisfaction should be viewed within the context of student expectations (levels of importance).

The Study

This report reveals the results of the pilot study of the new Adult Learner Inventory™ conducted by Noel-Levitz and CAEL (Council for Adult and Experiential Learning). The results identify the level of importance that adult learners place on aspects of their student experience and how satisfied adult learners are that institutions are meeting their expectations. This two-dimensional approach uses the new Adult Learner Inventory (ALI) to identify student concerns that are truly affecting student success. By revealing which aspects of campus adult learners consider most and least important, along with how satisfied the students are, this inventory provides a vehicle for institutions to set priorities that are closely aligned with those of their students in adult focused programs. This report looks at the combination of the data to identify strengths (high importance and high satisfaction) and challenges (high importance and low satisfaction).

The Source of Data

The 2003 National Adult Learner Satisfaction-Priorities Report represents data from 25 colleges and universities representing four-year public; four-year private; and two-year community colleges that participated in the pilot study of the Adult Learner Inventory with all or part of the adult learners in the fall of 2002. These institutions are all members of CAEL, a non-profit

organization dedicated to expanding lifelong learning opportunities for adults. There are 13,519 adult learners represented in this study.

The Instrument

The Adult Learner Inventory has been developed to assist institutions with the assessment of their adult learner programs. CAEL's *Principles of Effectiveness for Serving Adult Learners* serve as the basis for the Inventory's construction. The Principles provide the framework for institutions of higher education that want to make educational opportunities more accessible for adult learners and remove obstacles from the path to degree completion. The Principles were developed from an in-depth study of best practices in serving adult learners at colleges and universities in the U.S. and Canada.

The Adult Learner Inventory consists of 40 items that cover the full range of college experiences for adult learners. Each item is expressed as a statement of expectation. Each statement includes a rating scale of 1 to 7. Students are asked to rate the level of importance they assign to the expectation as well as their level of satisfaction that the expectation is being met.

The inventory findings are then presented with three scores for each item: an importance score, a satisfaction score, and a performance gap score, which is calculated by subtracting the satisfaction score from the importance score. A large performance gap score on an item indicates that the institution is not meeting the expectation; a small gap score indicates that the institution is close to meeting the expectation; and a negative gap score indicates that the institution is exceeding the students' expectations.

The Scales

For the Adult Learner Inventory, the 40 items of expectation are analyzed statistically and conceptually to provide seven composite scales. These scales follow seven of the eight *Principles of Effectiveness for Serving Adult Learners*, as defined by CAEL.

- **Outreach** assesses the way the institution conducts its outreach to adult learners by overcoming barriers of time, place, and tradition in order to create lifelong access to educational opportunities.
 - **Life and Career Planning** assesses how the institution addresses adult learners' life and career goals before or at the onset of enrollment in order to assess and align its capacities to help learners reach their goals.
 - **Financing** assesses the way the institution promotes choice using an array of payment options for adult learners in order to expand equity and financial flexibility.
 - **Assessment of Learning Outcomes** looks at the way the institution defines and assesses the knowledge, skills, and competencies acquired by adult learners both from the curriculum and from life/work experience in order to assign credit and confer degrees with rigor.
 - **Teaching-Learning Process** assesses how the institution's faculty use multiple methods of instruction (including experiential and problem-based methods) for adult learners in order to connect curricular concepts to useful knowledge and skills.
 - **Student Support Systems** addresses how the institution assists adult learners using comprehensive academic and student support systems in order to enhance students' capabilities to become self-directed, lifelong learners.
 - **Technology** assesses the institution's use of information technology to provide relevant and timely information to enhance the learning experience.
- The eighth principle is Strategic Partnerships. This principle can be assessed through CAEL's Institutional Self-Assessment Survey (ISAS). **Strategic Partnerships** looks at how the institution engages in strategic relationships, partnerships, and collaborations with employers and other organizations in order to develop and improve educational opportunities for adult learners.

Analysis of the Scales

The best place to begin is by looking at the big picture and understanding the areas on campus that matter most to adult learners. The following table summarizes the importance, satisfaction, and performance gap findings for the 7 scales on the Adult Learner Inventory. They are listed in order of importance.

2003 Scales: Adult Learner Inventory Report

Scale	Importance Mean	Satisfaction Mean	Performance Gap Mean
Outreach	6.47	5.67	0.80
Life and Career Planning	6.33	5.23	1.10
Teaching-Learning Process	6.23	5.65	0.58
Financing	6.16	5.33	0.83
Student Support Systems	6.11	5.33	0.78
Technology	6.09	5.37	0.72
Assessment of Learning Outcomes	5.92	5.20	0.72

(7 = very important /very satisfied 1 = not important /not satisfied at all)

Analysis

It is important that the analysis of the data include all three areas of measurement—importance, satisfaction, and performance gap. Focusing on only one area, such as performance gap, is likely to result in overlooking areas of the campus experience that adult learners value most. A combination of scores provides the most dynamic information for institutions to consider when developing an action agenda.

Using the matrix below permits the institution to conceptualize its student satisfaction data by retention priorities (challenges) and marketing opportunities (strengths). In addition, it allows the institution to pinpoint areas where resources can be redirected from areas of low importance to areas of high importance.

Strengths and Challenges

The individual items on the Adult Learner Inventory can be analyzed to determine strengths (high importance and high satisfaction). These are the items that the institution can incorporate into their marketing activities, recruiting materials, and internal and external public relations opportunities; and can use to provide positive feedback to the faculty, staff, administration, and students on campus. *Strengths are defined as being above the median in importance and in the top quartile of satisfaction.*

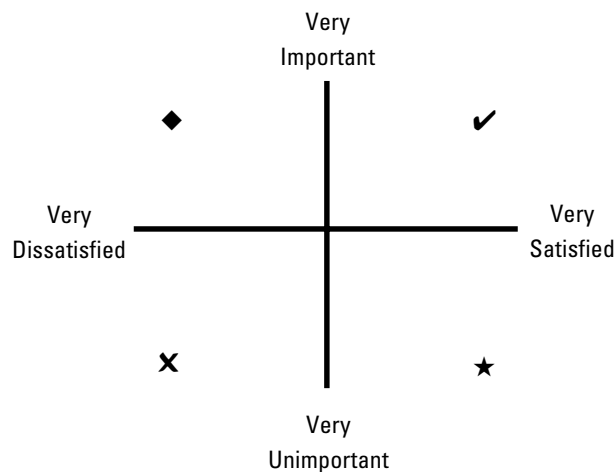
The items can also be analyzed to determine the key challenges (high importance and low satisfaction). These are the areas that the campus needs to address to improve retention at the institution. They are items where adult learners expect a lot, but where the institution is currently failing to meet their expectations. The areas of dissatisfaction are prioritized by their importance score so the institution knows it is working in the areas that matter most to adult learners. *Challenges are defined as being above the median in importance and in the bottom quartile of satisfaction and/or the top quartile of performance gaps.*

Following are the strengths and challenges as identified on the Adult Learner Inventory. They are listed in order of importance.

Strengths (high importance/high satisfaction):

- My program allows me to pace my studies to fit my life and work schedules.
- I have a clear understanding of what I'm expected to learn in my courses.
- My advisor is knowledgeable about requirements for courses and programs of interest to me.
- My instructors provide timely feedback about my academic progress.
- I am able to obtain information I need by phone, fax, e-mail, or online.

Matrix for Prioritizing Action



◆ High importance/low satisfaction

pinpoints areas that should claim the institution's immediate attention, i.e., retention agenda/priorities

✓ High importance/high satisfaction

showcases the institution's areas of strength that should be highlighted in promotional materials

✗ Low importance/low satisfaction

presents an opportunity for the institution to examine those areas that have low status with students

★ Low importance/high satisfaction

suggests areas from which it might be beneficial to redirect institutional resources to areas of higher importance

- Processes and procedures for enrolling here are convenient.
- I am able to choose course delivery that fits my life circumstances (e.g., on this campus, other campuses, online, in my community, at my workplace).
- The learning experiences within my program of study challenge me to reach beyond what I know already.
- My instructors respect student opinions and ideas that differ from their own.
- This institution provides “one-stop shopping” for most student support services (registration, financial aid, advising, textbook purchases, etc.).
- The frequency of interactions with my instructors is adequate.
- Technology enables me to get the services I need when I need them.

Challenges (high importance/low satisfaction):

- Sufficient course offerings within my program of study are available each term.
- I receive the help I need to stay on track with my program of study.
- I can receive credit for learning derived from my previous life and work experiences.
- This institution provides students with the help they need to develop a plan of study before enrolling.

Uses of Satisfaction Data

The primary uses of the Adult Learner Inventory results are to develop awareness and to ready campuses for institutional planning. Other uses include:

- Setting retention agenda
- Providing feedback to faculty, staff, and students
- Marketing the institution
- Strategic planning
- Preparing self-study for accreditation
- Influencing budget decisions
- Enhancing total quality management
- Pinpointing the specific expectations of different demographic groups

Participating institutions report that a more complete view of their students’ concerns enables them to achieve significant gains in their institution’s effectiveness more quickly because they know precisely where—and where

not—to focus their time, money, and effort. As many of these institutions have learned already, the results of the inventory serve as a blueprint for initiating change. The Adult Learner Inventory data have allowed them to move ahead confidently, avoiding the mistake of relying on traditional, incomplete measures of student satisfaction.

Reasons for Surveying Annually

To get the most value from satisfaction studies of adult learners requires that the institutions compare their students’ perceptions over time. Therefore, more institutions are making the decision to survey their adult learners on an annual basis in order to provide systematic feedback to their internal and external constituents on the effectiveness of all campus programs and services.

In addition, institutions report that their primary reasons for assessing student satisfaction annually include:

- Establish annual local benchmarking of their own student population
- Track the impact of new initiatives on student satisfaction
- Identify new areas for further improvement, based on the concerns of the current student body
- Track expectations of students as they progress through class levels
- Identify current strengths for recruitment activities
- Because what gets measured gets done

Summary

Successful institutions tend to share three basic attributes: they focus on the needs of their students, they continually improve the quality of the educational experience, and they use student satisfaction assessment results to shape their future direction.

Making the decision to regularly assess student expectations and levels of satisfaction can provide institutions with the insurance policy they need to maintain their edge in the academic marketplace. Adult learners whose needs are actively addressed by their institution are more likely to be successful in achieving their educational goals and are more likely to persist—and ultimately become the institutions’ best ambassadors and future benefactors.

For more information on the Adult Learner Inventory, contact:

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The Adult Learner Inventory™ was developed by Noel-Levitz and CAEL in 2002 and is published by Noel-Levitz, Inc.

For additional self-study options, CAEL has developed an Institutional Self-Assessment Survey that complements the Adult Learner Inventory. Contact CAEL for more information on this Survey and for information on becoming a partner in the Coalition of Adult Learning Focused Institutions.

For more information on the *Principles of Effectiveness for Serving Adult Learners*, contact:

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Importance to me... 1 = not important at all 2 = not very important 3 = somewhat unimportant 4 = neutral 5 = somewhat important 6 = important 7 = very important	Sample Adult Learner Inventory Items	...My level of satisfaction 1 = not satisfied at all 2 = not very satisfied 3 = somewhat dissatisfied 4 = neutral 5 = somewhat satisfied 6 = satisfied 7 = very satisfied
① ② ③ ④ ⑤ ⑥ ⑦	My program allows me to pace my studies to fit my life and work schedules.	① ② ③ ④ ⑤ ⑥ ⑦
① ② ③ ④ ⑤ ⑥ ⑦	Sufficient course offerings within my program of study are available each term.	① ② ③ ④ ⑤ ⑥ ⑦
① ② ③ ④ ⑤ ⑥ ⑦	Billing for tuition and fees is tailored to meet my specific needs.	① ② ③ ④ ⑤ ⑥ ⑦
① ② ③ ④ ⑤ ⑥ ⑦	I'm assessed on the knowledge and skills I'll need in my life and career.	① ② ③ ④ ⑤ ⑥ ⑦
① ② ③ ④ ⑤ ⑥ ⑦	My instructors provide timely feedback about my academic progress.	① ② ③ ④ ⑤ ⑥ ⑦
① ② ③ ④ ⑤ ⑥ ⑦	This institution provides "one-stop shopping" for most student support services.	① ② ③ ④ ⑤ ⑥ ⑦
① ② ③ ④ ⑤ ⑥ ⑦	Technology enables me to get the services I need when I need them.	① ② ③ ④ ⑤ ⑥ ⑦
① ② ③ ④ ⑤ ⑥ ⑦	The frequency of interaction with my instructors is adequate.	① ② ③ ④ ⑤ ⑥ ⑦
① ② ③ ④ ⑤ ⑥ ⑦	Processes and procedures for enrolling here are convenient.	① ② ③ ④ ⑤ ⑥ ⑦
① ② ③ ④ ⑤ ⑥ ⑦	I can receive credit for learning derived from my previous life and work experiences.	① ② ③ ④ ⑤ ⑥ ⑦