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CAEL tools aid campus improvements for students

Colleges and universities seeking to attract and retain adult students can use a two-part survey to identify issues important to adult learners, as well as the institution's strengths and areas needing improvement.

The Adult Learning Focused Institution Toolkit consists of two surveys — one completed by students and one completed by institutions. The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) has developed and tested the instruments and currently makes them available to institutions nationwide.

Of the 24 colleges and universities participating in the two-year pilot study, which was funded by Lumina Foundation for Education, 85 percent of the schools took some action based on survey results.

Thomas Flint, vice president of Lifelong Learning, Policy and Research for CAEL, says institutions pay special attention to weaknesses that students regard as important.

Capital University, a 4,000-student institution based in the Columbus, Ohio, suburb of Bexley, participated in the pilot study and made some changes based on the survey's results.

About 265 adult students from the university's Centers for Lifelong Learning completed the survey. In addition to Bexley, the Centers for Lifelong Learning offers courses on campuses in Dayton and Cleveland. Overall the students, staff and administrators ranked several of the survey's topic areas very highly. In the area of student financing, however, the students' results did not match the staff's and administrators' rankings:

The administrators and staff were proud of the options students had:

- Capital had a tuition payment plan.
- It accepted third-party payments.
- The university was flexible with tuition reimbursement plans.

But the students said they didn't know about some of the options or they were cumbersome to access, says Patricia Brewer, director of the Centers for Lifelong Learning at Dayton. In addition, students noted that delivery of services — including bookstore services — was inconsistent statewide and they desired one-stop shopping.

The university took action.

- It hired an adult program registrar who trained individuals at all three centers to accept online registrations from adult students, Brewer says. Previously, the university had done adult student registration through the mail with all information sent to the Bexley campus.
- Capital also hired an adult program financial aid and

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Principles of Effectiveness for Serving Adult Learners

Before CAEL developed its assessment tools, it completed an extensive benchmarking study involving six colleges and universities to determine best practices in serving adult learners. Out of that 1999 study, the organization developed the following principles of effectiveness in serving adult learners.

Outreach

The institution reaches out to adult learners by overcoming barriers in time, place and tradition to create lifelong access to education opportunities.

Life & Career Planning

The institution addresses adult learners' life and career goals before or at enrollment to assess and align its capacities to help learners achieve their goals.

Financing

The institution promotes choice using an array of payment options for adult learners to expand equity and financial flexibility.

Assessment of Learning Outcomes

The institution defines and assesses the knowledge, skills and competencies acquired by adult learners both from the curriculum and from life/work experience to assign credit and confer degrees with rigor.

Teaching-Learning Process

The institution's faculty members use multiple instruction methods (including experiential and problem-based methods) for adult learners to connect curricular concepts to useful knowledge and skills.

Student Support Systems

The institution assists adult learners using comprehensive

student accounts counselor to work directly with adult students on all financial aid and finance matters. This counselor makes regular trips to the Dayton and Cleveland centers and has extended office hours on the main campus for students who can't access services before 5 p.m. "We are catching issues before they become problems," Brewer says. Before this position existed, students might decide to drop courses and then learn they lost their financial aid. "Now we can better inform students of the consequences – it's a huge improvement," she says.

- Bookstore policies changed. Now adult students can purchase textbooks online from the main campus bookstore, and the books are sent to their homes.

"We knew we had some service issues, but the survey validated it," Brewer says. "We're providing better information and better service to our students."

Flint says that's the purpose behind the two surveys. "These tools are specifically designed to create a climate for change – to move in the direction of better serving students," he says.

Here's how the survey works:

A team of faculty, staff and administrators complete a questionnaire covering nearly 50 items. The team must provide only one answer to each item. Flint says the discussion that takes place to determine the answers has proven quite useful to institutions. Two different versions of the Institutional Self-Assessment Survey are available – one for colleges and universities that enroll adult students as part of the general population and one for institutions that enroll adult students in a designated school or unit.

A sampling of students completes the Adult Learner Inventory, a survey developed by CAEL and Noel-Levitz, a consultation firm focusing on enrollment management issues and solutions. In this survey the students rank the importance of specific topics and rate how well satisfied they are with the performance of the university.

After both surveys are complete, CAEL prepares a report that shows how the institution and the students rated each topic and notes the gaps that exist. There's no overall score, but institutions receive points that relate to specific principles CAEL has identified through research as being important principles of effectiveness for adult-learning focused institutions. The cost for administering both surveys and preparing the report is \$4,000. That fee includes surveying 500 students, Flint says. Surveying more students increases the fee.

CAEL has studied the re-enrollment percentages of institutions using the survey. Institutions with small gaps in performance had high re-enrollment percentages, and institutions with large gaps in performance had low re-enrollment percentages. "The adult learner population is very sensitive to lack of fulfilled expectations," he says.

Flint says it's hard to quantify the numbers of students who have been successful because of changes brought about by these tools. "There's tremendous potential to have these tools inform colleges about new ways to try to better serve their clientele," he says.

To learn more, go to www.cael.org/alfi

academic and student support systems to enhance students' capacities to become self-directed, lifelong learners.

Technology

The institution uses information technology to provide relevant and timely information and to enhance the learning experience.

Strategic Partnerships

The institution engages in strategic relationships, partnerships, and collaborations with employers and other organizations to develop and improve education opportunities for adult learners.