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### What is the ALFI Assessment Toolkit?

With extensive support from the Lumina Foundation for Education, CAEL developed the ALFI Assessment Toolkit to assist colleges and universities in discerning how well their programs and policies reflect the Principles of Effectiveness for Serving Adult Learners. The ALFI Assessment Toolkit consists of the **Institutional Self-Assessment Survey (ISAS)**, which assesses a wide range of practices and policies at an institution in relation to adult learning programs, and the **Adult Learner Inventory (ALI)**, which measures adult learners' satisfaction with numerous aspects of the college or university.

<http://www.cael.org/alfi.htm>

## Discovering Student Needs Through the ALFI Assessment Toolkit

### The Experience of Widener University, University College in the Path to Continuous Improvement

By Emily Richardson, Dean of University College, Widener University and Ruth Frey, CAEL Director of Lifelong Learning

With a fifty-year history of commitment to serving adults, Widener University's University College recently volunteered to participate in CAEL's Adult Learning Focused Initiative (ALFI) by using the Institutional Self-Assessment Survey (ISAS) and the Adult Learner Inventory (ALI) from the ALFI Assessment Toolkit. A key reason for Widener's interest in the ALFI Assessment Toolkit was the need for more information to help with institutional strategic planning.

In the fall of 2002, Widener University's new President, James T. Harris, III, outlined a university-wide strategic planning process. Emily Richardson, Dean of University College, recognized the University's need for a mechanism to assess its current programming and services to adult students.

"After attending the CAEL Conference in November 2003, I decided that participating in the ALFI Initiative would provide key baseline information on our ability to attract and serve adult learners. The University was also preparing for a Middle States accreditation visit, and based on other ALFI users' responses, the benchmarks provided could be used in answering some of the assessment questions posed by the Middle States Accreditation process. I also had been in my position slightly more than a year and thought an assessment of the entire operation would be valuable," Richardson says.

The assessment experience put Widener's University College on the path to continuous improvement, a mark of an Adult Learning Focused Institution.

## How Widener University Used the Tools

Each college and university has its own unique approach to applying the ALFI Assessment Toolkit process. This often depends on the circumstances and programs at the university.

### Using the Unit Version of the Institutional Self-Assessment Survey

Because the focus of the review was University College, Richardson decided to use the unit version of the Institutional Self-Assessment Survey (ISAS), which has been designed for departments or schools that service adults within a larger university. Richardson convened a University College assessment committee made up of sixteen members representing a cross section of all departments.

The assessment committee completed the ISAS through a combination of committee meetings and individual reviews. Once the University College's

adult learners completed the ALI, the committee also referred to the ALI results and discussed the eight Principles of Effectiveness for Serving Adult Learners in detail.

### **Adult Learner Inventory: Getting the Word Out to Students and Creating Focus Groups**

Simultaneously, the University College invited students to complete the ALI using notices in the college's newsletter, postcards mailed to all current students' homes, notices posted on department bulletin boards, and announcements about the survey during classes. The Administration made the ALI available at computers in the lobby and common areas of the campus. Printed versions were also made available in traditional classes.

University College also followed up with a series of adult learner focus groups to provide the staff with additional information about the motivations behind student responses on the ALI. The University College also implemented "mini surveys" for a short time that consisted of two to three questions to gauge students' needs on a particular issue that the school was working to change

### **How the Outcomes Affected Organizational Change**

Student feedback provided information that helped the University College make a few needed changes, while confirming the value of earlier changes and improvements.

#### **The Need for a One-Stop Center for Student Services**

Through the ALI, students told the University College staff that they were doing better than the staff thought in every case but one. The area students thought needed the most improvement was student services. Specifically, they identified the need for a one-stop center for the whole campus. This was a surprise because the staff had worked hard to provide the sense of a one-stop center within their own office by offering extended office hours into the evening and weekends and answering student questions running a wide range of topics.

"At first, I was not sure a one-stop center was a student priority, and I was reluctant to participate in its development," Richardson says. "However, the ALI showed that students wanted more of a one-stop center. In looking at the ALI results, I asked that University College's students be included in the university-wide development of the one-stop center."

#### **Recognizing the Value of Past Investments**

Administrators were encouraged by the results received from student scores in the Principle areas of Teaching/Learning and Assessment of Learning Outcomes. University College leaders attribute the high scores on the survey in this area to the constant efforts of leadership to provide adjunct faculty with adult learning resources and to the extensive use of adult learning theory in Widener's classrooms. They now realize that grooming faculty and providing teaching resources is a worthwhile effort and Widener will continue to improve upon it.

#### **The Need for More Advice and Guidance on Course Offerings**

One of the areas that the University College mini surveys addressed was course options and offerings. In their survey responses, students indicated a need for increased course offerings despite the University College's significant efforts to offer a variety of courses. After further investigation, the University College staff learned that students have the perception that course offerings

are limited because of their tendency to “self-advise.” Without the guidance of an advisor, many students do not have a well-thought-out plan that takes into account the College’s course scheduling.

Recognizing this need, University College studied its course schedule and created a model schedule for the seventeen bachelor’s degrees offered. Now, when students begin a course of study, a list of required courses and the semester cycle in which the classes are typically available is provided. Since most students take six or nine credits per semester, the course guide is set up with a two- and three-course plan to accommodate multiple student needs. This template can therefore help adult learners plan their courses through their entire degree. It also provides academic advisors with a useful planning tool in their own work.

University College staff also increased opportunities for advising and made it more convenient. It hired an Assistant Director for Academic Advisement and Retention to design an advising process that will help ensure students are taking the courses they need in the proper timelines and to increase online advising services.

### **ALFI as a Guide for Future Institutional Change**

Widener University’s strategic plan calls on each unit to define benchmarks against which it will be assessed as a way to ensure continuous improvement. University College has looked to the Principles as a guideline for its own institutional benchmarks and will track its institutional change into the future through the use of the ALFI Assessment Tools.

“The ALFI Assessment Toolkit enabled University College to establish benchmarks for future planning and improvements. I, along with the management team of the division, decided to use the ALFI process of self-study and student evaluation again in spring 2007. We believe that we have ‘so little time and so much to do,’ since our goal is to improve in at least two of the Principle of Effectiveness, while not falling down in the other principles,” Richardson says.

The ALFI principles have been converted to eight goals for University College. Each ALFI sub-principle is being cross-referenced with the Widener University Strategic Plan to look for similarities. Although this process has taken time, the end product aligns the future steps of University College with both the ALFI benchmarks and the larger strategic plan of Widener University.

“University College still has a long way to go to be able to improve the ALFI results by spring 2007,” Richardson says. “However, by using the ALFI principles as the core of our strategic plan we are moving forward and focusing on key improvements that meet the needs of the adult students that we serve.”

For more information on Widener University, University College’s use of the ALFI Assessment Toolkit, and for case studies of how other institutions have applied the tools, please see CAEL’s new ALFI case study publication:  
[http://www.cael.org/publications\\_research\\_whitepapers.htm](http://www.cael.org/publications_research_whitepapers.htm)

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