

## **Completion Agenda for Baby Boomers**

David Moltz

April 27, 2011; *Inside Higher Ed*

A group of nine community colleges is turning to some decidedly nontraditional students to help advance President Obama's goal for the United States to have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world by 2020: baby boomers looking to return to or remain in the workplace. Mary Sue Vickers, director of the American Association of Community Colleges's Plus 50 Initiative, made the case for the institutions' efforts earlier this month at AACC's annual meeting in New Orleans. With 78 million baby boomers entering their retirement years — and more of them living healthier, longer lives — there is great demand, she argued, for offerings designed to retrain the over-50 population for new careers.

“To meet future demands, we need to prolong the labor force participation of aging baby boomers,” said Vickers, noting that unemployed older adults tend to take longer than their younger counterparts to find work. “We need to increase educational opportunities for the current work force.”

The Lumina Foundation for Education has funded the Plus 50 Completion Strategy — a supplemental effort to the existing AACC initiative — at Cape Cod Community College, Clover Park Technical College, College of Central Florida, Joliet Junior College, Metropolitan Community College (in Missouri), Northeast Wisconsin Technical College, Pasco-Hernando Community College, Santa Fe College and Wake Technical Community College. These nine institutions are encouraging people over 50 who have earned college credits in the past to complete a degree or certificate. They are also encouraging employers of plus-50 adults to send current employees back to college. The effort hopes to bring 40 percent of the individuals it attracts to “completion,” earning either a certificate or an associate degree, by 2014.

Rosemary Dillon, dean of health sciences at Cape Cod Community College, said there is a critical need to further educate the baby boomer population in her institution's service area. A third of Cape Cod's population is over 60. In addition, recent census data show that its under-18 population has declined significantly in the past decade.

To attract boomers to the college, Dillon said, her institution recently staged a “career changers” conference to highlight the changing “employment forecast” for the future of the Cape. The event featured a number of workshops for attendees. Some of the topics included “generational differences in the workplace” and “what it's like to be an older student on a college campus.” “When this was over, I stood in the middle of campus ... and I did not see one person who didn't come out of this with a big smile on their face and say, ‘This is great,’ ” said Dillon, noting that the event attracted 180 local residents. She explained that boomers simply need to be shown that they are welcome on college campuses and that institutions have programs specifically to benefit them.

To assist older students interested in returning to college, Dillon said her institution created an “adult learner services center” that identifies current skills, provides career counseling, refers

students to other support services, and helps track students through their certificate or degree program.

Mabel Edmonds, dean of workforce development at Clover Park Technical College, in Washington, noted that her institution has also created a “single point of contact” adviser to provide support services to plus-50 adults. It also hosted a career expo specifically for this population, at which the college educated local employers about the value of hiring older, more-experienced workers.

Ultimately, though, those involved with the Plus 50 Completion Strategy stressed that colleges hoping to attract older students need to enhance their marketing and branding efforts.

“For instance, does your college catalog have people like that,” said Vickers, pointing to a photograph of a group of gray-haired and bespectacled students, “or do they look like typical 18-year-olds?”

Also important, Vickers and the other officials said, is having baby boomers tell their own stories about being downsized and seeking retraining. This, more than any marketing technique, they argued, has the greatest impact on other boomers. YouTube videos of over-50 students in retraining programs, talking about the experience of being back in the classroom, are popular recruiting tools for many colleges.

The outreach effort at the participating institutions has already attracted a number of such students, all with their own stories about what brought them back to college.

“I was laid off, and I spent 25 years in real estate title business,” said Susan Martin, a student at Joliet Junior College, in one of the program’s many video testimonials. “My time has come. It’s time to switch, not only [because] of the economy but because of the time spent.”

Martin has earned a human resource certification at Joliet and is working toward an associate degree. She is now an instructor with a work-certified program for her area’s workforce investment board -- a group that directs government funds to help retrain unemployed workers. She explained that she was nervous about returning to college at first, but eventually became comfortable with it.

“You’re never too old to learn,” Martin said. “I think it keeps you young. It’s been wonderful.... I’ve met so many wonderful people going through different phases in their lives. It’s been such a fabulous opportunity. And, actually, it led me to find out what I want to be when I grow up.... It’s wonderful reinventing yourself. Just be open to all of the opportunities presented.”

**Commentary**

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October 2011

In the article, *Completion Agenda for Baby Boomers*, Moltz highlights how community colleges are currently implementing programs, such as the American Association of Community Colleges' Plus 50 Completion strategy, to encourage older learners to return to America's college campuses. The effects of the recent recession and the educational desires of the 78 million baby boomers have higher education institutions reconsidering their approach to older learners. Community colleges face the challenge of navigating their complex mission as institutions that serve as the gateway to four-year colleges, workforce development and two-year occupational programs, and service to the local community and state, to serve an increasingly diverse student population (Beach, 2011).

Since the 1960s, community colleges have a long history serving older learners. They used federal grants provided under both the Higher Education Act of 1965 and the Older American Act of 1965 to create college programs and services addressing workforce development for older Americans. To further this initiative, community colleges created new campus positions and departments focused on serving this emerging student population. As a result, over 50% of older learners enrolled in higher education are now enrolled in two-year institutions (Lakin, Mullane, & Robinson, 2008).

Realizing this trend, recent federal and state efforts have made community colleges more attractive to older learners. The majority of states have statutes providing older citizens with the opportunity of auditing public college courses free of charge (see Thompson, 2003, for an overview of Over 60 programs) and the Obama administration recently designated substantial funding to support initiatives at community colleges (e.g. Health Care and Education Reconciliation Act of 2010), recognizing the vital role these colleges play in America's educational success. Federal grants are being directed towards retraining the workforce, specifically for people 50 and older. Many of these people have been released from their job and often have a more difficult time finding new employment. They also face several difficulties returning to the classroom, many for the first time since high school.

More attention, however, is necessary to help these individuals transition from worker to student. Older learners face three types of barriers in returning to college campuses: situational, dispositional, and institutional (Cross, 1981). Situational barriers are defined as those directly associated with the individual, such as family obligations, level of physical mobility, and access to adequate transportation to the campus. Dispositional barriers include perceived self-doubt or negative thoughts; for example, "Can I really learn to use a computer at this age?" Institutional barriers are perceived difficulties that can include complex enrollment procedures, lack of support services for older learners, and campus accessibility issues. The barriers facing older learners have changed little since Cross's initial research in the late 1970s, and financial challenges may be the newest "barrier," as the cost of tuition and associated learning costs, such as textbooks, internet access, and computers, continue to rapidly increase. However, learning

technology is *not* a barrier and older learners are eager to learn how to use technology (Fox, 2004), are increasingly utilizing the internet (Rainie, 2010), and are receptive to distance learning (Silverstein, Choy, & Bulot, 2002).

Although older learners face different challenges than their younger counterparts, implementing higher levels of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997) and appropriate levels of institutional support at community colleges can help older learners overcome these dispositional and institutional barriers. Programs dedicated to addressing these barriers, such as the Plus 50 Completion Strategy, are garnering more attention and support among community colleges as well as national educational associations. Support for such initiatives have increased with organizations such as the Lumina Foundation and the American Council on Education (ACE) encouraging institutional collaboration and assisting community college leaders to seek out federal grant opportunities. For example, The Plus 50 program is funded from a \$3.2 million dollar grant from The Atlantic Philanthropies.

While Moltz does not focus specifically on the retiree population, such a potential population cannot be overlooked. Recent cover articles in *Time*, *The Economist*, and *The Chronicle of Higher Education* have illuminated the issues facing retirees. *Business Week* dedicated an entire issue to retirement, aptly titled, *Rethinking Retirement* (Business Week, July 13 & 20, 2009). The increasing costs of homes, travel, and hobbies have led some retirees to conclude that retirement may not be as attractive at the traditional age as before. People are working longer because the cost of leisure is much more than before (Baum & Ford, 2002). In addition, college educated retirees are more interested in returning to the classroom (Grabinski, 1998) for educational, social, and employment related opportunities.

As Mary Sue Vickers states in Moltz's article, more retraining opportunities are needed for older learners to prepare them for longer careers. At Guilford Technical Community College, Elton Grainger Jr. took an early retirement from the trucking business to study nursing. He believes his career change will provide him the opportunity to work in the nursing field for 10-15 years and lead to opportunities in hospital administration. Despite the economic downturn, the health care field has continued to expand and this is an area where community colleges can prepare older individuals for new careers that will benefit both the individual and the community in areas of skilled labor need.

The number of older learners will continue to increase in community colleges as the two-year institutions directly and purposefully continue to engage older learners. New initiatives and opportunities that are directly targeted to older learners that lead to academic degrees, certificates, and other credentials will benefit both the individual and the economy, particularly in the community where the person resides. Some state leaders have intentions of making older learners an important part of educational programs (Fishman, 2010), yet more partnerships between and among higher education institutions and the government are needed. These will contribute to President Obama's overall desire to increase the percentage of Americans with college degrees that will contribute to future economic prosperity.

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### **Discussion Questions**

For those who may wish to use this article for teaching and or professional development purposes, here are some guiding questions that may be helpful:

1. Should institutions of higher education encourage older learners to attend their institutions?
2. How can campuses address the situational, dispositional, and institutional barriers that older learners may perceive?
3. Should retraining be the only focus for older-learner recruitment?
4. Should tuition-waiver non-degree Over 60 programs be replaced with programs where older learners earn college credit and make progress toward a degree? Who should pay for such a program?
5. What experiences have you had with older learners in your higher education career?