Leading Your Way to Success: Turning Your Leads Into Participants in Your Adult Degree Completion Program

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Abstract: In the United States, there is a significant need for higher education institutions to provide adult degree completion programs (ADCP) to help students complete their degrees. According to the National Student Clearing House Research Center, as of July 2021, there are 41 million students with some college, no credentials (SCNC), in the United States (Causey, et al., 2022). The purpose of this article is to discuss a Northwest Arkansas regional university's adult degree completion program, which successfully guides students from initial lead generation to facilitating students' progression to graduation. The following research provides a guide to best practices, including program development, program requirements, lead generation, marketing, nontraditional credit, onboarding, retention, and program success, for higher education institutions.

Keywords: adult degree completion programs, student retention, credit for prior learning (CPL), prior learning assessment (PLA), and non-traditional students.

As of July 2021, there are 41 million students in the United States who have completed some college but left postsecondary educational institutions without earning a credential such as a college degree. These students are known as having some college, no credential (SCNC) (Causey, et al., 2022). In the State of Arkansas, only 23% of Arkansans have achieved a bachelor's degree or higher, as compared to 37.9% of Americans (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). In Sebastian County, Arkansas, where this adult degree completion program originated, only 19.69% have achieved a bachelor's degree or higher (Sebastian County Arkansas Population, 2020).

The characteristics of college students have changed dramatically over the last several years. Lumina Foundation (2019) reported that 64% of college students work, and of those students, 40% are working full-time (2019). In addition, 37% of college students are 25 years or older, and 46% of those students are attending college for the first time (Lumina Foundation, 2019). Adult Learners have been defined as those over 24, with responsibilities such as work and family (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2021), adults 25 years and older who have a bachelor's degree earn $1,334 in median weekly earnings as compared to $809 in median weekly earnings for those with only a high school diploma. Unemployment rates are also higher for those with only a high school diploma (6.2%) as compared to adults with a bachelor's degree (3.5%) (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021). In response to the rapidly increasing number of students with an SCNC status, the university in Northwest Arkansas started the adult degree completion program (ADCP). The university is a regional comprehensive with an enrollment of just under 6,300 (University of Arkansas-Fort Smith, 2023). In 2019, the university created an adult degree completion program for adult students ages 25 or older, who have previously completed 30 college credit hours, and who have five years of work experience.

Best Practices

This research discusses the development of a successful adult degree completion program at a Northwest Arkansas University. Best practices for this program include topics such as program development, program requirements, lead generation, marketing, non-traditional credit, onboarding, retention, and program success.

Program Development
The program was developed in the fall of 2019 to fill the need for degree completion for adult learners in the nation. Students apply for a Bachelor of General Studies degree or a Bachelor of Science, in Organizational Leadership degree. The initial program started with an in-person inaugural portfolio course to learn about credit for prior learning. Subsequently, the portfolio course is now online, allowing students to complete the Bachelor of Science in Organization Leadership degree, fully online.

The organizational leadership classes are held in an eight-week format and are taught by professors who are versed in the principles of andragogy. Students typically register for 12 credits per 16-week semester and six credits in the summer term. In addition, these students write a portfolio to be assessed, earning on average 3-15 credits toward their selected degree.

Program Requirements
Program requirements include participants who must be over the age of 25, have 30 college credits, five years of work experience, and documented learning to complete a portfolio.

Lead Generation
Ideas for lead generation include event planning and attendance of Chamber events, the purchase of marketing documents and creatives, referrals, and collaboration with area community colleges. The adult degree completion program partners with the university's communications department to purchase marketing such as billboards, data analytics, and social media advertisements. In addition, each semester, the adult degree completion program requests Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) allowable directory information (U. S. Department of Education, 2021) listing graduates from two-year colleges in the area. This information provides the name, date of graduation, and degree conferred. Some institutions provide the student's email address.

Prospects from the lead generation conducted by the adult degree completion program, are invited to an open house. Open houses are held at least once per term and are available both virtually and on campus. The open house events are advertised on the University's website, social media, and through the Chamber of Commerce.
The Chamber of Commerce offers additional ways for meeting potential students for the ADCP. The Chamber has a Leadership Program that team members can join and become very involved in the community. The Chamber provides opportunities for ambassadorships, and the ability to attend ribbon cuttings for new businesses, and hosts expos. Many new students are obtained through marketing and Chamber events.

New students for the adult degree completion program are also referred to the university by the businesses in the Chamber, Alumni, and current students. Many of the university students provide our email and webpage to friends, family, and co-workers. The university strives to set up a virtual or in-person meeting within 24 hours of a request for information regarding the program.

Marketing

Marketing tools include the use of pull-up banners, handouts with information about the program, and register to win gift baskets. The gift baskets are used at open houses and educational expos. In addition, the program staff purchases giveaways such as bookmarks, pens, and notepads to hand out. The adult degree completion program logo is affixed to each item. Photographs of the adult degree completion students are featured on the marketing tools, such as a pull-up banner with student graphics, which has a permanent location at the local community college.

Non-Traditional Credit and Transfer Credit

The adult degree completion program helps students earn credits through several non-traditional methods. Credit for prior learning (CPL), also known as prior learning assessment (PLA), includes the following assessments; DANTES Subject Standardized Tests (DSST), exams administered by Prometric, College Level Examination Program (CLEP) administered by College Board, and Advanced Placement Credits, (AP) a process where high-school students are taught college-level content and can take an exam to earn college credit (CAEL, 2017; Soria, 2023; Warne, 2017).

Furthermore, the program will review joint transcripts, which is a collaborative program that translates military schooling and work history into the civilian sector of education, and the assessment of prior learning through the portfolio process (Ryu, 2013). Participants in the adult degree completion program have life or work-learning experiences that they can use to fulfill course objectives through a portfolio process of credit for CPL and PLA (CAEL, 2017). This process is initiated by the student taking a three-credit course on how to document their prior learning through a written narration and exhibits (e.g., formal work samples) based on a specific syllabus. The portfolio is assessed by a five-person committee and if approved, course credit is granted for the portfolio.

In addition to non-traditional credit hours, the university reviews transcripts for transfer credits, approved course substitutions, and military credits transferred from the regionally accredited Community College of the Air Force. There are a maximum of 30 non-traditional credit hours that may be applied at the university.

Onboarding

Student leads come to the adult degree completion program through email, the universities website, open house documents, phone, and referrals from the admissions team. The initial appointment (most often virtual) with potential students is immediate or set for within 24 hours if possible. During this appointment, the Advising Coordinator discusses the adult degree completion program, the admissions process, and program registration.

The initial appointment is followed up by the advising coordinator with an email. The advisor provides links to the University's application, financial aid, scholarships, and registrar's office, for transcript review. In addition, the applicant is provided with the contact information for their financial aid advisor. Once admitted to the university, degree plans are reviewed along with advising, and course registration.

Retention

There are several retention techniques used by the university to ensure the matriculation of students. These techniques include providing one program advisor from lead to graduation, assigning a dedicated financial aid advisor to each student, and hiring faculty that are well-versed in andragogy practices.

Classes are held online and in an eight-week format. This allows adult degree completion program students to have the flexibility to complete coursework on their schedule; thus removing barriers for returning students to complete their degrees.

Program Success

The success of the adult degree completion program continues to provide opportunities for students to complete their credentials as working adults. Since the fall of 2019, the university has had 61 students fulfill the requirements of the ADCP and obtain a Bachelor's Degree in General Studies, a Bachelor of Science Degree in Organizational Leadership, or an Associate's Degree in General Studies along the way. The program continues to admit new students and has over 100 advisees. Over 60 portfolios have been assessed for credit, saving students both time and money and providing a positive return on investment for the university. This program provides a path for students to close the gap between adult learners having some credit, and no credentials and completing their credentials using credit for prior learning.

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