

The University College: Responding to the Needs of Adult Learners

JERRY J. LEWIS
UNIVERSITY OF ARKANSAS
AT PINE BLUFF

Colleges and universities are being challenged to meet the diverse needs of the increasing numbers of adult learners enrolling in developmental education courses. Some administrators have responded to this challenge with administrative units called University Colleges. These units are infrequently discussed in the literature. This article briefly describes services that University Colleges provide to meet the needs of these learners.

College students in their mid-twenties, or adult learners, are transforming higher education as they enroll in developmental education courses (Ansley & Creech, 2000). They seek broadened educational experiences, increased self-esteem, career changes, entrance (or reentrance) into the workforce, completion of occupational credentials, or other objectives (Craig, 1997). Friedman (1997) argues that if college administrators are to retain these students at their institutions, they must provide services that meet their unique needs. To do so, some educators have established flexible administrative units called University Colleges.

Although University Colleges have existed in America since the 1930s (Strommer, 1993), they are infrequently discussed in program literature. Even though one can find descriptions of University Colleges at particular colleges or universities, it is difficult to find sources that discuss them from the global perspective of program development. Indeed, some of the dated references cited in this paper demonstrate the paucity of literature that discusses these units.

According to Strommer (1993), most University Colleges are portals of entry for incoming freshmen and focus on these students until they graduate. Campus resources are centralized to provide academic support such as developmental education courses, advisement, and orientation.

University Colleges, however, are flexible and, once in place, can add new programs to meet the unique needs of different student cohorts at different times (Strommer, 1993). Their flexibility makes them ideal to meet the needs of adult learners. Jackson (1986), for example, describes a University College that offered services that included telephoning their adult learners to inform them that requested classes had been cancelled and to recommend

possible substitutions. Likewise, Byrne and Wolfe (1986) describe one that offered free, non-credit Saturday workshops and conferences; another offered its first-year adult learners half-priced tuition.

Some University Colleges offer individualized degrees to meet the unique needs and interests of adult learners. The University College at Ohio University offers a Bachelor of Specialized Studies degree, which provides its adult learners with a method for pursuing specific career or academic goals that cannot be met through traditional degree plans (<http://www.ohiou.edu>). Another University College, at the University of Memphis, offers students the opportunity to develop and complete individualized, interdisciplinary degrees such as the Bachelor of Professional Studies, the Bachelor of Liberal Studies, and the Master of Arts in Liberal Studies degrees (<http://www.uc.memphis.edu/>).

In recent years, some institutions have merged their University Colleges with other administrative units to better meet the needs of their adult learners. The University of Minnesota is an example. Its University College and Continuing Education and Extension(CEE) office merged in 1996 and was renamed the College of Continuing Education (CCE) in 1999 (<http://www1.umn.edu/usenate/fcc/96-10-31a.html>). Today, the CCE focuses its services on adult learners who seek an education on a part-time basis for career enhancement or personal enrichment (<http://www.cce.umn.edu/gateway/aboutcce.html>).

CONCLUSION

Fairchild (2003) argued that most institutions are ill equipped to take on the diverse needs of their adult learners and recommended that institutions 1) revisit how they provide student services, 2) develop orientation programs tailored to adult students, 3) provide different types of financial assistance, 4) engage students in extracurricular activities, and 5) evaluate their admissions criteria and recruitment strategies. In response to Fairchild's recommendations, this paper advocates the use of University Colleges. These administrative units have had a long and successful history in American higher education. They have proven to be flexible and capable of meeting the needs of different students at different times. With institutional leadership and planning, they can also meet the needs of adult learners enrolled in developmental education programs.

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Jerry J. Lewis is an Associate Professor and Reading Coordinator in the University College Division at the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff. He is also the recent past president for the Arkansas Association for Developmental Education (ArkADE). For further information, Mr. Lewis may be contacted at the following email: lewis_jl@uapb.edu

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