THE NISOD PAPERS

NISOD

An occasional publication dedicated to topics of interest to community and technical college educators.

37 Million and Counting: Toward Innovative Approaches to Recruitment, Retention, and Credentialing

Context of the Issue

I recently have been involved in an exploration, examination, and analysis of Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) and Competency Based Education (CBE) in higher education institutions across the nation. While these approaches have been around for decades, they have resurfaced on the public radar due to a perfect storm within the higher education/workforce development landscape.

- College enrollment across the country (particularly in many community colleges) is declining or flat as the post-recession recovery has spawned job growth across all sectors.
- The number of graduating high school students has peaked (Husser, W.J., and Bailey, 2013). Consequently, there will be fewer of these traditional-age students in education and employment pools.
- An estimated 37 million non-traditional (over age 24) U.S. adults have some college credits, but no degree.
- A report (2015) by the nonprofit group Campaign for College Opportunity estimates that about 4.5 million California adults never completed their studies.
- Opportunity gaps for non-completer adults exist nationwide, particularly in populous states such as California, where about a third of African American adults have some college credits, but no degree (2015, *Los Angeles Times*).
- The U.S. Chamber of Commerce reports (2016) that there are approximately 5.6 million unfilled jobs across all sectors in the United States.
- The U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation (2016) is engaging employers in a Talent Pipeline Management initiative focusing on the role employers play as leaders or "end users" of education/workforce collaborative partnerships.
- The Pew Research Center (2010) reports that roughly 10,000 Baby Boomers (born 1946-64) will turn 65 every day for the next 13 years. They report that about 26 percent of the U.S. population are Baby Boomers.
- Boomers' busy lives and careers necessitate convenience, flexibility, adaptability, personalization, high tech, and high touch tools if they are to successfully navigate the higher education and training landscapes.
- Boomers want their earned knowledge and life experiences acknowledged, validated, and recognized. They want to able to demonstrate what they know and not have to re-learn what they already know.
- There are not consistent, specific, and targeted strategies in many institutions to reach out to this population of potential students.

National Conversations

In my many conversations with higher education stakeholders at various institutions around the country, I have received similar feedback regarding the need for a new approach to re-engage the millions of students who need to obtain a credential to enhance their value to their current or future employers. Colleges are realizing that the new, creative, innovative economy requires a higher level of skill, mental dexterity, and critical thinking. These colleges and their employer partners are identifying skill shortages and the lack of an identifiable talent pool to fill high-skill, high-wage current and future employment. They are rightly concerned about the looming perfect storm that will impact their way of life as they currently know it.

I recall my conversation with a stakeholder from a university in New Jersey that has 18,000 online students. This particular university was founded as an online, competency-based institution that understands that it does not matter where or when you learned a competency, as long as you can demonstrate that you know it. This particular college provides multiple avenues for students to gain credit such as credit by exam, prior learning assessment (PLA), and competency-based education (CBE). Students at this school enter with an average of 60 college credits. They are not re-taught what they already know. Rather, they are awarded credit for the competencies they can demonstrate. Thus, students earn a credential of value that enhances workforce and economic development in that particular region.

I had two recent conversations with stakeholders from a community college and a university in the state of Utah. Apparently, Utah is becoming the next Silicon Valley (2015). Software firms such as Adobe and Qualtrics have sprung up in addition to medical device manufacturers and aerospace companies. The population of areas such as Salt Lake City is growing extremely fast. The natural beauty of the state and the winter recreational activities are huge population draws as well. My conversations were replete with discussions about the need to meet the current talent needs of employers, particularly in the Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math fields. While the colleges there have great programs and graduates, they are challenged to keep up with the demand for highly skilled workers. Thus, incumbent workers with previous college or with skill competency in particular areas are excellent candidates for CBE or PLA.

The 13 community colleges in the state of Colorado are part of a statewide Colorado Community College System. The colleges synchronize their PLA activities with a statewide coordinator. I had a chance to speak to the statewide PLA coordinator who explained how the system works with each of the colleges to ensure that there is consistency in the administration of prior learning assessment. Each college has a position responsible for prior learning assessment. I spoke via phone with the Arapahoe Community College (ACC) Graduation and Prior Learning Assessment Coordinator. In addition to being extremely patient, knowledgeable, and articulate regarding PLA, she was very patient walking me through the various processes and protocols. The ACC PLA website (https://www.arapahoe.edu/admissions/transfer-college-credit/credit-prior-learning) is well done, not only with clear processes to follow, but costs associated with challenge exams, portfolio, and certificate/ licensing, along with the number of credits associated with each charge.

States like Colorado, North Carolina, Tennessee, Kentucky, Ohio, Texas, Massachusetts, Arizona, New York, New Jersey, Virginia, and Pennsylvania, among many others, are focused on statewide synergy, scaling, and collaboration as they engage in the good work yet to be done in outreach to the 37 million-plus across America. Collaborating with the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL), Competency Based Education Network, American Council on Education, U.S. Distance Learning Association, The Lumina Foundation, and other stakeholders, educational and training entities are working diligently to develop effective institutional processes and practices to re-recruit and retain adult learners.

What Leaders and Innovators Must Do Now

- We must collectively review, analyze, and make use of the good work from the four rounds of Department of Labor Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College Career Training (TAACCCT) funding designed to expand job-driven training partnerships between community colleges and employers. The TAACCCT Grants were a $2B initiative (DOL, 2014).

- Review and use the good work and best practice models of TAACCCT-funded projects such as the TAACCCT-funded website Knowledge to Work (www.knowledgetowork.com/) designed by Lord Fairfax Community College.

- Understand PLA and CBE on the Competency Continuum through CAEL (www.cael.org/pla/publication/pla-and-cbe-on-the-competency-continuum).

- Use CAEL's 5-minute PLA assessment Credit Predictor Tool on your college's website as does the CUNY School of Professional Studies (https://earncollegecredit.org/cuny-sps/cp#/home).

- Identify your state's portion of the 37 million-plus adults with some college credits and no degree and develop a strategic and targeted marketing plan (with metrics) to reach out to and re-enroll and retain them.

- Review the Adult Completion goals and strategies of the Lumina Foundation and various states (www.insidehighered.com/news/2015/08/06/texas-wants-60-percent-young-adults-hold-college-degrees-2030).

- Develop specific and focused educational and training partnerships and pathways such as The Alamo Colleges Institutes (www.alamo.edu/main.aspx?id=48814) or Houston Community Colleges' Centers of Excellence (www.hccs.edu/centers/?utm_source=centers-of-excellence&utm_medium=web&utm_campaign=hccs-redirects/) or The City Colleges of Chicago College to Careers initiative (www.ccc.edu/menu/pages/college-to-careers.aspx).

- Develop a statewide PLA organizational infrastructure such as Ohio Higher Ed's (https://ohiohighered.org/PLA-members).

- Prioritize Prior Learning Assessment at the state level with a statewide Prior Learning Assessment office with identified PLA coordinator positions and contacts at each institution (www.cccs.edu/current-students/prior-learning-assessment/).

- Train faculty (subject matter experts) in portfolio assessment so that they are able to successfully evaluate prior learning and identify if the learning warrants the award of credit.

- Develop a comprehensive Search Engine Optimized PLA/CBE website that is user-friendly and navigable to potential PLA/CBE students. Excelsior College has a user-friendly website (www.excelsior.edu/transfer-more-credits/prior-learning-assessment) where they offer Learning Portfolios in partnership with CAEL through LearningCounts.org. Houston Community College has a user-friendly PLA website as well (www.hccs.edu/district/students/acc).

- Identify potential PLA/CBE candidates in programs such as first responders (police, fire, EMT, paramedic, Allied Health, etc.) where training can be evaluated for appropriate college credit.
- Develop articulation agreements (where possible) with transfer institutions to accept PLA/CBE credit.
- Learn more about PLA from The American Council on Education (www.acenet.edu/news-room/Pages/Adult-Learners-Guide-to-PLA.aspx).
- Become conversant with the current information regarding Federal Title IV Financial Aid Funding, Competency Based Education, and the Higher Education Act (HEA) (www.acenet.edu/the-presidency/columns-and-features/Pages/Time-and-Money-How-Financial-Aid-Fits-into-the-CBE-Equation.aspx).
- Develop a collegewide/systemwide or statewide PLA Crosswalk that allows for standard PLA alignment and student-friendly approaches to what qualifies for credit. IVY TECH Community College in Indiana has a great model (www.ivytech.edu/pla/).
- Collectively, leaders and innovators must recognize the good and challenging work ahead. They must muster the courage and fortitude to acknowledge (and gain buy-in from) traditionalists and purists who posit just one model of earned credit and credential validation. What we know now is that the perfect storm is not debating or waiting for us to act. Rather, the 21st century economy is moving at breakneck speed. It is time for new and innovative approaches to recruiting, retention, and credentialing.

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