

**MONDAY, FEBRUARY 9, 2015**

# Attracting and Retaining Adults: Top 10 Features of Programs Designed for Busy Adult Students

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Today, the non-traditional adult student is the norm. Over the past three decades, busy adults have been going back to school in record numbers to advance in and change their careers. During the most recent decade, after experiencing the Dot Com crash and the Great Recession, adult learners in North America have become more savvy consumers of higher education.

Colleges and universities can no longer adopt the attitude: “If we build it they will come” as they create and offer degrees and professional development programs. Adults today look for educational opportunities that can better ensure they will have the best chance at securing good jobs and earning promotions upon graduation. While schools cannot guarantee employment for their alumni, they can create programs that will give their graduates the best chance at professional success after they complete their education. To attract and retain busy students, there are ten key features that schools should include in their programs.

## **1. Direct link to professions and jobs**

The most successful programs lead



A strong adult program isn't built accidentally; there are a few best practices that can help an institution ensure their programming is perfectly suited for the non-traditional marketplace.

to professional certification or licensure, or the degree/certificate earned is required to be hired into specific positions. For example, programs that prepare graduates to sit for the exam required to become licensed Speech Language Pathologists (SLP) are the most appealing to prospective students who are looking for specific careers and direct pathways to those jobs. As well, jobs like Chief Executive Officer and Public Health Director require applicants to have earned specific degrees: Master of Business Administration (M.B.A.) and Master

of Public Health (M.P.H).

## **2. Affordable tuition rates**

Adult learners today manage busy family schedules, have endured more than one economic downturn, and are financially conscientious. What's more, the average American family holds over \$15,000 in credit card debt in addition to auto loans, mortgages and their children's school related expenses. When mature adults decide to pursue advanced degrees or professional education, they are seeking career gains and

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE

# Attracting and Retaining Adults: Top 10 Features of Programs Designed for Busy Adult Students

CONTINUED FROM LAST PAGE

future economic freedom, not insurmountable debt. Colleges and universities can respond to price-sensitive adult applicants by creating cost structures that capitalize on competitive admissions, moderate class sizes, and learning strategies that promote high retention rates.

### 3. Accelerated and paced for busy adults

One of the first questions prospective adult learners ask when they inquire about a program is: "How soon can I graduate?" These pragmatic students want to see the light at the end of the tunnel at the time of application. On the flip side, they also ask: "Can I really succeed while also working and caring for my family?" Colleges and universities must create programs that can be completed quickly but that also are delivered in such a way that students can succeed in all of their endeavors—without sacrificing quality and rigor.

### 4. Pre-set schedules and program plans

Busy adult learners are not the only people experiencing their education. The employers and family members of these students support and are affected by adults going back to school. University programs that recognize the need to respect the scheduling constraints of their learners will create programs with:

- 1) Established dates and times for all classes so they can plan with family and employers.
- 2) Breaks during major holidays to respect personal and family time,

and 3) Guaranteed class offerings and teach-outs if the program is discontinued or enrollment is lower than expected.

### 5. Flexible yet structured

Defined schedules and purposeful instructional strategies and policies can make or break the success of a program that enrolls adults. Academic rigor should never be compromised when programs are created and curricula delivered. To maintain quality while also creating an environment conducive to learning for busy adults, programs need to be clearly planned in advance, with structured assignment schedules, and program staff and faculty must be prepared to appropriately work with adult students who experience work and family issues that occasionally compete with their school expectations.

### 6. Cohorted programs with guaranteed access to classes

Cohorting programs for busy adult learners, and guaranteeing access to courses for on-time graduation, is a win-win for schools and their students. Cohorts create immediate opportunities for peer engagement and community building. Retention is correlated with how connected students feel to their college, professors, and fellow learners. As well, because well-planned cohorts increase retention, universities can plan for smaller class sizes and lower tuition rates. What's more, this is even more possible when adult applicants are assured they will get their needed classes and thus graduate on time.

### 7. Networking opportunities with future colleagues

We meet future colleagues in college. Applicants who apply to the same program possess common career aspirations, life experiences and values. Adult learners returning to school typically work in their field of intended study or a related field, and career-switchers are interested in moving into the field of student peers. Established, professional programs tend to employ faculty-practitioners. Thus, online and residential programs that foster intentional and relevant opportunities for professional networking with peers and practicing instructors are the most attractive to midcareer learners and the most likely to be touted by grads after graduation.

### 8. Individualized student services

Students have many choices to advance their careers through higher education. In the academic life of a student, recruiters and professors come and go, but advisors should remain consistent throughout a learner's program experience. Busy adult learners will stay the course if they have a designated advisor to contact when in crisis and to talk with when confused or overwhelmed. When adult learners are accompanied through a program, from application to graduation, by designated staff members who get to know them and their needs, they are more likely to make it to graduation.

### 9. Prestige

The academic quality and prestige of a program, its faculty, and the institution as a whole are essential to recruiting and retaining students.

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## Attracting and Retaining Adults: Top 10 Features of Programs Designed for Busy Adult Students

CONTINUED FROM LAST PAGE

Busy adult learners will not waste time and resources on endeavors that may not lead them to their goals: job attainment and career advancement. Professionally focused programs for midcareer learners are appealing when schools possess an established name in a field of study, accreditation in good standing, programs and professors with honors and awards, instructors who are well-known for their positive contributions in their field, and when graduates have gone on to hold superior positions in reputable organizations.

### 10. Engaging, interactive and real-world learning experiences

The most important aspect of a good program is twofold: 1) interactivity and 2) a focus on student learning versus instructor-driven teaching. To support success after college, programs must foster active engagement with multi-modal content, peer learners and professors. Lecturing at students is no longer considered acceptable; successful programs focus on ensuring students are in fact learning what they need to know to graduate and succeed in their careers. Busy adults will apply to, succeed in, and stick with relevantly engaging and intentionally interactive programs that foster real, measurable learning, regardless of mode of delivery.

In the coming months, I will discuss each of the top ten program features in greater depth, and share some applied examples of degree and professional programs that meet the criteria. Note, most programs—even the most successful programs—will not likely possess all ten features;

however, most successful programs will capitalize on key aspects of some of the features outlined above and explored in the upcoming editions. Finally, these pieces will provide higher education program planners and curriculum developers the opportunity to think strategically about what they are considering as future offerings, and how they can bolster their new program plans to better ensure success for adult students and the institutions offering their programs.

This is the first article of a series exploring the top 10 features that truly characterize programs designed for adult students. Over the course of the series, Kalfsbeek will explore each of the 10 features in greater detail.

Next installment coming soon.



### **JENNIFER KALFSBEEK**

#### ***Current Position and Past Experience***

Jennifer is the Assistant Dean for Program Development at CSUN, responsible for leading the development of new programs for adult learners, as well as a professor of graduate research methods and assessment & evaluation in the colleges of Health and Human Development and Education.

Since 1996, she has taught courses in the social sciences in traditional and on-line classrooms. Her research draws on three core areas: access to education – including accessibility (ADA), education for the global workforce and professionalization, and effective online teaching and learning.

#### ***Education, Honors and Achievements***

Dr. Kalfsbeek-Goetz received her B.A.S. in Psychology from the University of Minnesota, her M.A. in Sociology from the University of Maryland, and her Ph.D. in Education Administration from Capella University.

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