

A NATIONAL DIALOGUE:  
The Secretary of Education's Commission  
on the Future of Higher Education

ISSUE PAPER

*Eleventh in a series of Issue Papers released at the request of Chairman Charles Miller to inform the work of the Commission*

**Hidden in Plain Sight: Adult Learners Forge a New Tradition in Higher Education**

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*Summary: Although "traditional" 18-22 year-old full-time undergraduate students residing on campus account for only 16% of higher education enrollments, the attention given to this group of students obscures the fact that the vast majority of college and university students are "non-traditional" – largely working adults struggling to balance jobs, families, and education. This paper examines how colleges and universities – supported by effective policy – can better align their educational offerings to meet the needs of adult learners and thereby play a critical role in increasing access to higher education and sustaining the health of our economy.*

**The Problem**

For many of us, the word "college" is synonymous with young students, ivy covered buildings, dormitory life, and "the final four."

- Yet this stereotype of the "traditional" 18-22 year-old full-time undergraduate student residing on campus represents little more than 16 percent of the higher education population in the United States – fewer than three million of the more than 17 million students enrolled today.

In fact, the "traditional" student is anything but traditional if by that term we mean "common," "conventional," or "customary."

- 40 percent of today's students study part-time.
- 40 percent attend two-year institutions.
- 40 percent are aged 25 or older.
- 58 percent are aged 22 or older.

In many respects, these so-called "non-traditional" adult learners juggling jobs and family while studying part-time and working full-time or part-time are the new tradition in higher education.

- These adult learners attend community colleges, enroll in schools of continuing or professional education at public and private universities, attend for-profit postsecondary institutions, receive training in the workplace, and enroll in adult education courses at local community centers.

- Adult learner-focused organizations like these are already hard at work innovating and striving to meet the educational requirements of adult students, but they can't succeed without support from the broader higher education community, including institutional leaders, federal and state policy makers, employers, and the public.

Although adult learners are everywhere in higher education, they remain invisible – hidden in plain sight – and curiously absent from many of the dialogues concerning the purpose and mission of higher education.

- Yet these “non-traditional” students make up the vast majority of higher education students.
- The National Center for Education Statistics reports that 92 million adults – or 46 percent of the U.S. adult population – participated in some form of adult education in 2001 (the most recent figures available).
- Almost 8 million adults were enrolled part-time in college or university degree or certificate programs.
- Almost 60 million adults were engaged in work-related courses.
- And yet, as other Issue Papers in this series have attested, there remains a critical absence of solid data on these part-time students, and this hampers the abilities of community colleges, schools of continuing and professional education, and for-profit postsecondary institutions in their efforts to effectively identify, target, and reach these students, as well as other prospective students like them.
- Generating these data is an absolutely critical activity because higher education is a bridge to a career in the knowledge economy for vast numbers of working adults, and lifelong learning is a necessary ingredient in retaining a position within the knowledge economy.
- As research undertaken by the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education shows, demographic shifts within our population threaten to lower education attainment and per capita income rates within 15 years unless efforts are made to get more “non-traditional” students into colleges and universities.
- U.S. Department of Labor data indicate that 90 percent of the fastest growing jobs require some form of postsecondary education. In this respect, the focus on adult learners is integral to sustaining the health of our economy.

As our nation passes through a period of significant change with respect to its economic security, demographic profile, and competitive position on the global stage, it is especially important that we enable our higher education institutions to become more responsive to the needs of students of all types.

- We need higher education institutions that are far more attentive to the work of segmenting their customers and tailoring their services to meet the unique needs of discrete constituencies within the broader postsecondary customer base.
- Insofar as the “traditional” student is no longer traditional, very soon the “traditional” university may likewise become a thing of the past.
- Already, we are off-shoring more than call centers, and we face further risk of high-end services jobs such as engineering, research and development, and consulting moving off-shore as well.

- Where once the United States led the world in educational attainment, recent data from the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development indicate that the United States is now ranked seventh with respect to the proportion of adults aged 25-64 with some postsecondary credential, and another half dozen countries are close on our heels.
- To sustain our leadership in the knowledge economy, we must ensure that Americans are prepared for high-value jobs as knowledge workers.

### Where Change Is Needed Most

To succeed in this effort, colleges and universities must become more customer-centric organizations that are better equipped to meet the changing needs of their customers, particularly with respect to access and affordability.

- Adult learners require easier transfer of credit from institution to institution.
  - Credit transfer policies must become more rational to support working adults who not only change careers and move from one part of the country to another, but also study at multiple institutions.
  - The movement of our people is increasingly fluid, but institutional efforts to control the flow of tuition create a non-integrated higher education infrastructure that is poorly suited to the needs of these mobile customers.
- Adult learners require more flexible course, certificate, and degree programs.
  - Recent federal policy changes, such as the elimination of the “50 percent rule” that limited the growth of online programs, reflect positive change in this direction.
  - Increased access to online learning and education at the workplace is needed to open up higher education to greater numbers of working adults.
  - Currently, state regulations can inhibit certain forms of online learning as providers may be required to register within states simply to proctor an examination. Such regulatory burdens may do little to protect the public but much to forestall the increased access to educational opportunities for adult learners. Where appropriate, these regulations should be redressed.
- Adult learners studying less than half-time require more flexible financial aid policies.
  - Most students studying less than half-time simply do not qualify for financial aid, and few have access to other forms of grants or scholarships.
  - More than 22 percent of prospective adult learners who choose not to enroll cite cost as an obstacle, according to research conducted by Eduventures.
  - Recent proposed changes to the Higher Education Act such as year-round Pell grants are a step in the right direction.
  - Likewise, innovative programs such as Lifelong Learning Accounts (LiLas) and Career Advancement Accounts (CAAs) create critical new financing mechanisms for adults.
  - As another Issue Paper in this series has noted, research indicates that a focus on increasing grant aid rather than student loan programs or tax credits may be more successful at increasing adult higher education participation rates, especially among low-income groups.

Colleges and universities must undertake this work even as it cuts against the grain of the culture of higher education.

- Concern over the transfer of credits is as much about controlling tuition as it is about the enforcement of particular curriculum standards.
- Faculty may object to accelerated course formats on the grounds that they are not pedagogically sound, or simply maintain that they prefer not to teach online.
- Financial aid may be used more as a tool to optimize cash flow and improve institutional rankings than as a means of increasing access for those in greatest need.

### **Online Learning Increases Access to Higher Education for Working Adults**

In 2005, 1.2 million higher education students were enrolled in fully-online certificate or degree programs, according to Eduventures research.

- That's approximately 7 percent of the higher education community. The number of fully-online students is expected to grow to nearly 1.8 million by 2007.
- The most recent figures from the Sloan Consortium indicate that in 2004 more than 2.35 million students – almost 14 percent of all higher education students – enrolled in an online course (as opposed to a fully-online degree program).
- Eduventures' research shows that while fewer than 4 percent of prospective adult students have enrolled in a fully-online program, more than 77 percent of those prospective adult students report that they would consider enrolling in a fully-online program.
- Online learning represents a powerful opportunity to support working adults seeking to complete a bachelor's degree, earn a professional certificate, or obtain a graduate or professional degree.
- Clearly, online learning can make it possible for adult learners to more effectively incorporate learning into their busy lives. We are just at the start of a major change in how education is delivered.

Yet significant portions of the academy remain bogged down in debates over the rigor of online learning and the true costs of delivering education online.

- Issues of quality are of course critical, whether a course is delivered online or in a classroom. There have been poor online courses just as there have been poor classroom-based courses.
- But for some within the academy these arguments are merely excuses for maintaining the status quo and avoiding change at virtually any cost. To some extent, these debates have the character of a disinformation campaign and may be driving prospective students away from online learning.
  - As a counterpoint to those within the academy who work to inhibit the growth of online learning, other organizations such as the Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications ([www.nosignificantdifference.org](http://www.nosignificantdifference.org)) and the National Center for Academic Transformation ([www.thencat.org](http://www.thencat.org)) have gathered evidence of the extent to which online learning can provide educational experiences equal to those in the classroom and lower instructional costs for the institution.

- Eduventures' research shows that for those adult students who see barriers to their future study online, among the most important concerns is the worry that employers won't regard credentials earned online as being credible – despite the fact that universities rarely make any distinction between those credentials they confer to online learners and those they confer to classroom learners.
- This is especially troubling given that the majority of employer organizations (51.8 percent of those surveyed) believe that online learning is equal in value to classroom learning, according to Eduventures research. A further 10.5 percent believe that online learning offers superior value relative to classroom learning. In all, more than 62 percent of employers have taken the position that the value of online learning is equal or superior to the value of classroom learning.

### Higher Education Must Become More Responsive to the Training Needs of Industry

According to Training magazine, American corporations spent more than \$51 billion on training in 2004.

- Of that vast sum of expenditures, the majority (over 74 percent) went to the salaries of internal training staff. But more than \$13 billion were devoted to purchasing services from third-party providers such as professional associations, consultancies, commercial training companies, colleges and universities, government agencies, and others.
- Eduventures estimates that colleges and universities had only a 5 percent share of these expenditures for outsourced services in 2004 – amounting to about \$670 million.
- By encouraging universities to see the provision of corporate “training” as an integral part of their mission rather than as a debasing activity that threatens their reputations among “traditional” aged students, we can go some distance to delivering high-quality education to greater numbers of working adults.

The problem is that – on the whole – universities are not designed to respond rapidly to the changing education and training needs of industry.

- In a 2005 survey of more than 500 corporate and government organizations undertaken by Eduventures, among the top capabilities employers reported seeking in third-party providers of education and training were “customization” and “applied learning.”
- When asked to identify those areas where universities could improve to better meet their education and training needs, the top two areas identified were “applied learning” and “customization.”
- Clearly, there is still some distance for many colleges and universities to travel before they can effectively serve employers seeking these capabilities. But the effort must be made to better align their educational offerings with the needs of employers – those organizations that ultimately employ the students passing through their institutions on the way to a better life.
- Otherwise, industry will continue to do what it has done for the past two decades: work around higher education by creating its own system for training and development.

## Conclusion

History is littered with examples of industries that, at their peril, failed to respond to – or even see – changes in purchaser behavior: from the railroad industry to the computer hard disk industry to the music industry.

- When it comes to the adult learner community – those 92 million Americans – our institutions of higher education face similar risks of having their market share substantially reduced and their services increasingly characterized by obsolescence.
- For higher education institutions to effectively mobilize to meet our real education needs, it will be necessary first to recognize the diverse faces of higher education – and that means recognizing the extent to which adult learners are the future of higher education.
- If we accomplish that, we can focus on educating our increasingly diverse populations so that they can prosper and enrich their lives in ways that ultimately serve the economic, cultural, and competitive interests of us all.

Peter J. Stokes, Ph.D. is Executive Vice President of Eduventures LLC. Peter has been an executive with Eduventures since 1998 and is a nationally recognized expert on education issues. In 2005, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* named him one of "higher education's new generation of thinkers" shaping debates on education policy and practice. He is a key member of Eduventures' leadership team and plays a central role in managing Eduventures' Learning Collaborative research programs serving senior administrators in continuing and professional education, and online higher education. Peter has also held teaching positions at Tufts University and the Massachusetts College of Art. Peter has a B.A. and a Ph.D. in Literature from the State University of New York at Stony Brook.