ADULT LEARNING

How Colleges Are Thinking Differently to Serve Adult Students

By Rebecca Koenig   Feb 26, 2020

Monkey Business Images / Shutterstock

*This article is part of the guide **EdSurge Live: A Town-Hall Style Video Forum.***

More than a third of today's college students are over age 25, and there are millions of Americans who have earned some college credit but no degree. Colleges and companies are trying to learn how to attract and educate this large population of current and potential adult learners.

With their family responsibilities, jobs and financial aid restrictions, these students require different kinds of resources, support systems and instructional techniques than younger college students. Indeed, a 2019 report from the U.S. Department of Education concluded that adult learners need

their own edtech tools instead of being expected to learn from the same resources designed for children and teens.

To learn about innovations in adult education, EdSurge invited Meg Benke, provost and executive vice president for academic affairs at SUNY Empire State, for a live online discussion as part of our series of video town halls called EdSurge Live.

You'll find a partial transcript below. It has been lightly edited for clarity.

To learn more, Benke recommended resources at the National Research Center for Distance Education and Technological Advancements at the University of Wisconsin and the Center for Distributed Learning at the University of Central Florida.

EdSurge: Who are adult learners today and is this different than who adult learners were 50 years ago? Who are we talking about when we use that phrase?

Benke: Well, 50 years ago, I think we talked about adult learners as displaced workers, displaced homemakers. That was the early generation of adult learners. I think it's transitioned much to the current time and there has been huge growth in the students who are being served. At our own institution [we] see a bi-modal population of adult learners. We see many students in their twenties who are choosing to go to work and have lives that are complicated by full-time work, full-time study. We also see many older adults who are looking for multiple career paths.

The nature of jobs changing over time has created some changes in the adult learning population. I also think we are seeing a much more culturally and ethnically diverse population of adult learners who we are working together to serve in broad ways to enhance their learning.

It's been established for decades that educating adults requires a different approach than educating children or teenagers. I was curious if you could tell us a little bit about some of the foundational practices of adult education. I know you and I have talked about using problem-based learning,

thinking about prior learning assessments, not assuming that adults need to be taught everything from square one but that they bring interesting work and life experiences to the table.

What we've learned over time is, particularly in the area of prior learning assessment, [fit]in two different strands. One is that when we teach in our environments that we teach, we need to work with our students and to recognize what they bring to the classrooms, whether they be face-to-face or online learning. For example, we have programs where we have many experienced people who are in a corporate- or union-sponsored program. It would be silly to assume that it was a blank slate when you're teaching subjects like collective bargaining or teaching a subject like management when people are bringing significant experience to that particular classroom. So it's imperative that faculty adjust what they do for that experience.

I think the second thing is, as you mentioned, we talked about prior learning assessment. I think the most innovative adult learning programs are either recognizing what adults bring through either a competency-based model where learners are tested for their knowledge or through a prior learning assessment methodology of portfolio. My own institution has worked quite collaboratively with others. As I mentioned, working with corporations or labor unions at Empire State College, for example, we might work with an organization like CVS and evaluate their management training program or their diversity and human resource program and help to blend that into an employee's education so that they have a pathway not only to getting a degree or certificate at Empire State, but also being able to help them to advance in their place of employment.

Most adult learners are generally going to school for a couple of reasons. One is to advance in their career but also for just learning to get recognized for the jobs they already have. So it's important through prior learning assessment to validate what people know. What we found with the prior learning research, CAEL has done research that's shown if people do prior learning assessment, they're more likely to graduate. They're more likely to continue term to term. They have positive feelings about their education and the work that they do moving forward.

I have a colleague here at Empire State who's done some work that shows when people do PLA, they also translate that PLA into confidence on the job. So if you'd get PLA in a subject that you're working on that's close to your work experience, that process of reflection actually helps the employee apply that learning in the workplace after they've done the PLA.

Tell us about the importance of student support services and how they are different for adults than for an 18 to 22-year-old on a residential college campus. What does the research show about why these are important and who's doing it well?

The way that effective adult student services are delivered is starting with the premise that the services are being delivered to a student audience that is very different. And you start from the assumption of where and how and when they are going to need the help.

For example, you could have an extensive orientation program that includes lots of student success in that orientation program. Or, what we find much more effective, is if you actually embed the students services right in the courses that people are taking. So if you think about it, if an adult student is in an online or a blended experience and they come across that first research paper, that's when they need to learn more about the academic support that's available and they need to be able to get help in an automated way right when they are having that problem.

So they're starting to work on the paper on Friday night at five o'clock or they're starting on the paper at 4 a.m. and they need to be able to get some embedded student supports, to be able to have some open educational resources that help them to know what they need to do. And then they need to be able to get to a live tutor on a schedule that is going to be able to serve them over the particular time. Those types of supports, particularly on the academic side, are really important to adult learners, and they need to be able to get them quickly and on their schedule when they need them and particularly directed to them.

Some of the research would show that there are certain things that adult learners might be challenged by. You put heavier supports in your introductory level math courses, whether that be in a first-year

program or a community college student moving to a third-year program. If you're doing a graduate program, you put together resources that help people when they're starting to do those first big projects in graduate school.

The other thing that you'll sometimes find is that getting students to work together to support each other in a cohort-based program. I think across the country we've seen the cohort programs can also be very successful because adult learners can support each other.

Some people might assume that adult learners don't necessarily value interaction with their classmates as much as maybe younger students might. But it sounds like that's not necessarily the case, and the peer-to-peer learning is also important for a more mature population, too.

Right. The example I give, if they're teaching business and a learning outcome is to learn how to work more effectively in teams, adult learners probably have team-based learning experiences they bring to any class or program that they have, but they also need to develop that program to move that forward. It's our responsibility as educators to create opportunities for people to work in teams and to do them in effective ways. That can be done even at a distance with technology-based solutions to get people working in synchronous chats like we're doing here in Zoom. Many graduate programs I think do that really well for serving adult learners.

I also think that there are a subset of adult learners who are really looking for some of the socialization that you would find in a typical college program, not residence halls. For example, we run research residencies over the weekends where students get together who have common interests in things like environmental studies or women in leadership or topic-based things that would bring adult learners together.

We have historical studies where people go to Gettysburg, and you wouldn't think that an adult learner would find value in that kind of experiential push. But if you plan it well enough in advance and adult learners who are looking for that kind of colleagueship, they will choose to do that kind of work.

What kinds of alternative course delivery formats are having success with adult learners? We've seen a lot of different kinds of alternative credentials being created. There are accelerated courses. There are certificate programs. Where do you see promise in delivering adult education a little bit differently?

I think in New York State and elsewhere throughout the country, there has been growing interest in eight-week courses as a methodology. Adult learners like the aspect that they can focus on one or two subjects and then move on to one or two subjects the next term. And then if they miss eight weeks, it's not like missing 15 weeks if they have to stop out so it can keep progress moving forward. I think we're seeing some good work in those accelerated terms moving forward. I do think I see emergence of more creating blended opportunities.

One of the things that we find here at Empire State College is that the connection to the local community is important to learners and that learners who have even a short blended experience where if the program is online, if they have a weekend residency or if they have a periodic seminar where they come into a physical location, they're more likely to complete their program. So while online program can be extremely effective, having that blended program that connects to the local community and connects to people who are in the vicinity of where they live I think has some very, very big promise.

[Audience question]: I'm a representative of an e-assessment platform company [from the Netherlands]. I was curious on how online assessments should be changed for adult education compared to normal education that is given to a younger or let's say teenage students. What can we do differently?

We used to say that we should never give an adult learner a test or that if you gave an adult learner a math test, you would be creating anxiety.

I think the field has emerged quite beyond that where we now understand that having some repetitive testing and repetitive checking of the adult learner knowledge for different types of adult learners

can actually improve learning. For example, there have been work done here in the United States and I'm sure that you're doing some of that in the Netherlands where if you set up a platform that allows the adult learner to self-test using technology, then the instructor can spend more time working with the student on the deeper knowledge areas. So you're focusing your faculty work on the deeper knowledge versus doing repetitive assessment that can be done via technology.

[Audience question]: I teach at a four-year university and I have a lot of students who I teach upper division electives, junior and senior courses and they are important courses, cultural diversity, interactive communications, things like that, and I give a multitude of different types of assignments. The big problem I have is students with the full loads. My adult learners with the full loads, they put me last, and interactive communications is actually a required course. The weekly discussions, they're asynchronous but I gave them a due date. Like class starts on Monday through Thursday and then they have till Sunday to reply to two other students. Well, most of them are waiting until Sunday to get these things done because the pathophysiology, nursing and dental hygiene, health science majors, they've got tough loads. Those full loads are really tough. And I try to encourage them. What are any suggestions to get them to participate with other students?

Yeah, I think you've hit a really hard area. Adult students working, often they're working at the same time as they're doing a full load and trying to lay out the time management and the prioritization of what you're doing. What I suggest often is partnering with your academic success people and getting them to look with you at your course. I think sort of almost a triage, of librarians, academic support people, trying to figure out why is it that students are not engaging in whatever it is that is of particularly high importance. And is there an instructional design approach that would allow you to be more successful?

I've seen some experiments at other colleges where faculty get together. I think I saw this at Athabasca in Canada where faculty get together and they look at when assignments are done within the program. So if you're teaching in the general education area and the faculty in the nursing

program work with you to make sure that deadlines between the various courses and the types of assignments are balanced in some way. So probably we're going to try that.

Rebecca Koenig (@becky_koenig) is a senior reporter at EdSurge covering higher education. Reach her at rebecca [at] edsurge [dot] com.

Higher Education   Adult Learning   Digital Learning in Higher Ed