Adult Student Retention: Important To Your Institution’s Bottom Line

Andree Robinson-Neal, Azusa Pacific University
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Having had the opportunity to work as a community college administrator for a number of years, I saw the determination of a diverse group of students as they sought to improve their employment opportunities through increased education. My belief in the community college system, long known for what we now sometimes refer to as social justice education, grew by leaps and bounds during those seven years. Students challenged by socioeconomic constraints, educational limitations, and familial/cultural barriers often find success there and may often be found in greater numbers than at our public and private universities. Such success may be bolstered because of relatively smaller classes and counselor caseloads (when compared to those at many state universities, for example).

The university at which I now serve has a robust population of adult students in undergraduate, graduate, and degree completion programs. The 2010 data set for the institution reveals that the average age of all full- and part-time undergraduate students was 22 years. We have a College that offers programs specifically for adults as well; the students in our adult and graduate programs range in age from 21 to over 70.

Adult students have particular demands which affect their learning. To be successful, their college or university must understand and accommodate those specific needs.

If you work for an institution that provides training, certification, or any level of post-secondary degree through face-to-face or distance education, these students are in your classrooms also.

Some sources report that attracting more adult students will counteract the possibility of having fewer students on higher education rosters because of the decrease in high school graduates. Whether or not your institution is increasing its adult student population, it is important to recognize that many of these students require systems of support that are different from so-called traditional age undergraduates in order to succeed.

I was a sophomore in high school and remember my 40-something-year-old father talking about how his program advisors and university counselors helped guide him through the complex system of application and registration. They also provided information on work-life-school balance. He became a strong spokesperson for his institution and convinced a number of colleagues that it was important to return to

Continued on Next Page
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CONTINUED FROM LAST PAGE

t get their friends and family members to consider your institution), institutions must invest in training staff, faculty members, and administrators to talk with students and listen to their needs in order to help guide efforts to successful completion. Students who feel heard tend to persist.

It is important to recognize that there are issues affecting the adult student that your “traditional age” students may not yet be facing: consider the need to work full-time while attending class; to arrange care for children; to care for an ailing parent or partner/spouse; and to handle financial obligations such as mortgage payments and other bills. This recognition—and how your institution deals with this population—becomes vital to multiple bottom lines, including accreditation reporting, word-of-mouth recruiting, and state and federal aid.

References


PANELIST PROFILE

Current Position and Past Experience

Since 2011, Andreé Robinson-Neal has been the Executive Director of Graduate Student Support Services at Azusa Pacific University. She spent the four years prior to this working as the Director of APU’s Inland Empire Regional Center.

Prior to taking her position at Azusa Pacific University, Robinson-Neal was the Director of Community Outreach Services, and then Manager of Institutional Research, at Salem Community College in New Jersey, spanning nearly seven years with the college.

Education, Honors and Achievements

Robinson-Neal earned her BA in Psychology from Rutgers State University of New Jersey—New Brunswick in 1991. In 1993 she earned her EdM in Counseling from Temple University. In 2009 she earned her EdD in Educational Leadership and Change from 2009, and in 2010 she earned a Certificate from the same institution in Teaching in the Virtual Classroom.

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