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ABSTRACT

In 1998, the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools established a fifteen-member Task Force to study the practices and procedures employed in adult degree completion programs. An adult degree completion program is identified as one that is designed especially to meet the needs of the working adult who, having acquired sixty or more college credit hours during previous enrollments, is returning to school after an extended period of absence to obtain a baccalaureate degree. The survey designed by the Task Force was completed by 78 institutions in the country. The survey report identified: (1) lessons learned regarding strengths and weaknesses of the programs; (2) exemplary principles of good practice; (3) the impact of the programs on the broader educational activities of institutional providers and the higher education community in general; and (4) strategies appropriate for an accrediting commission to use in ensuring quality in adult degree completion programs and practices without restricting access. Some of the exemplary practices reported in the study include the following: (1) faculty members are committed to serving adult learners, have appropriate credentials and participate in policy-making and professional development activities; (2) the institution offers adequate administrative support, financial and institutional resources to ensure the effectiveness of the programs; and (3) the institution provides access to a range of student services including admissions, financial aid, academic advising, delivery of course materials, and counseling and placement services. Contains 20 references and 5 appendices. (KS)

ADULT DEGREE COMPLETION PROGRAMS

**A Report to the Board of Trustees
from the Task Force on Adult Degree
Completion Programs and the
Award of Credit for Prior Learning
at the Baccalaureate Level**

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A Report to the Board of Trustees from the Task Force on Adult Degree Completion Programs and the Award of Credit for Prior Learning at the Baccalaureate Level

Overview

Adult degree completion programs have become increasingly relevant within the higher education community and they are growing at a rapid pace across the nation. While the inception of such programs dates back at least to the early 1970s, the upsurge in interest in them is apparently a result of the marked increase in the number of working adults who seek to attain new levels of academic achievement—a goal highly related to advancing in their current work environments, preparing for greater job mobility, and/or learning for purposes of enrichment.

According to information appearing in *Adult Degree Programs: Quality Issues, Problem Areas, and Actions Steps* (Council for Adult and Experiential Learning and American Council on Education, 1993), only 100 adult degree completion programs could be identified in the United States in 1983. This number had grown to 284 as of 1993. Interestingly enough, the NCA Task Force conducting this study identified approximately 110 institutions among its NCA/CIHE members who reported data indicating that they sponsor adult degree completion programs in some form.

To ascertain what kinds of programs are being offered and what program practices are operative, the Task Force developed a survey instrument that was sent to the 110 identified institutions. Seventy-eight of the institutions whose programs fit the adult degree completion program definition established by the Task Force completed the survey instrument.

Organizations such as the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) and the Adult Higher Education Alliance (formerly The Alliance: An Association for Alternative Degree Programs for Adults) have served as standard bearers for the movement in adult education for a long time and their voices have grown stronger with the passing years. While championing the growth of the adult education movement, program advocates simultaneously express concern about achieving and maintaining a high level of quality in these programs.

Adult degree completion programs come in a variety of forms, ranging from the classic “2+2” programs to those that allow for a wider range of flexibility. Because many of these programs use new paradigms or are offered beyond the confines of an institution’s traditional main campus, issues such as scope, oversight, content, consistency, relevance, integrity, and support services may challenge the institution delivering the programs as well as those responsible for evaluating them.

The rapid growth of adult degree completion programs being established within NCA member institutions has risen to a level of significant concern to its Board of Trustees. While the Commission generally focuses on the quality of institutions as a whole, it cannot ignore specific operational and program components that determine an institution’s substance. In this context the Board is concerned about factors that include (1) whether the overall adult degree completion program movement is being monitored appropriately as a part of the accreditation process, (2) whether institutions that offer adult degree completion programs are doing so in the context of their respective missions, and (3) whether institutions offering adult degree completion programs can show patterns of evidence indicating that quality outcomes are being achieved. Simply put, the Board is concerned about

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whether institutions that are engaged in the delivery of adult degree completion programs are providing broad support and oversight similar to that provided for their more traditional programs. In this context, during November 1998 the Board of Trustees authorized the establishment of a fifteen-member Task Force on Adult Degree Completion Programs and the Award of Academic Credit for Prior Learning at the Undergraduate Level. Staff moved soon thereafter to identify persons to serve as members of the Task Force. The charge issued to the Task Force appears in Appendix 1.

Organization of the Task Force

The fifteen persons invited to serve on the Task Force reflect the conscious efforts of staff to organize a diverse and resourceful working group. Nine members are from NCA member institutions and represent the public and private sectors as well as institutions in the two-year, four-year, and master's educational program levels. The six remaining members represent colleges and universities outside the NCA region, consortia of educational institutions, corporate universities, higher education commissions, and professional organizations whose missions focus on adult learners. The Task Force also is diverse with reference to gender and ethnicity. (See Appendix 2.)

The work of the Task Force, originally planned to span a year, was spread over a fifteen-month time frame, and its meetings were held in Chicago. Telephone conversations, voice mail, email, facsimile transmissions, and small one-to-one sessions served to maintain effective communication links among task force members between meetings.

The Task Force held its organizational meeting on March 31, 1999. During this meeting, the group (1) discussed the scope and ramifications of the Board's charge, including the recognition that programs at the baccalaureate level were to be the focus of the study; (2) developed a consensus on how it would define *adult degree completion programs*; (3) discussed ways to identify institutions that would be invited to participate in the study; and (4) decided it would use the survey method to learn what is occurring in adult degree completion programs within member institutions.

Task Force members emphasized the importance of gaining the confidence of member institutions that were being asked to provide information about their practices outside of the traditional self-study process. Therefore, the Task Force wanted to ensure that the participating institutions could maintain their anonymity in all aspects of the study—from the dissemination of the survey forms to the collection and analysis of the institutional responses. This factor weighed heavily in the Task Force's decision to use a research organization to assist in the survey process.

Also during the first meeting the Task Force developed its working definition of an adult degree completion (ADC) program:

An adult degree completion program is one that is designed especially to meet the needs of the working adult who, having acquired sixty or more college credit hours during previous enrollments, is returning to school after an extended period of absence to obtain a baccalaureate degree. The institution's promise that the student will be able to complete the program in fewer than two years of continuous study is realized through provisions such as establishing alternative class schedules, truncating the traditional semester/quarter time frame, organizing student cohorts, and awarding credit for prior learning experiences equivalent to approximately 25 percent of the bachelor's degree credit hour total.

Recognizing that NCA operational guidelines and expectations are expressed in a set of *Criteria for Accreditation* and *General Institutional Requirements*, the Task Force agreed further that its attention and end product should be focused on identifying *principles of good practice* rather than on citing examples of perceived good practices. Such an approach enables an institution to decide how a *principle* might be applied internally, just as the institution is left to decide how it will realize its mission through an implementation of its own statements of vision, values, and priorities.

Following the first meeting, NCA staff used the Commission's database to identify institutions, based on their annual reporting, that offer adult degree completion programs. Task Force members, members of Commission-affiliated institutions, and members of other professional organizations also identified institutions to be added to the list of potential survey participants.

During its second meeting held on June 23, 1999, the Task Force worked to refine and develop a set of survey items. The NCA *Criteria for Accreditation* were used as a reference in determining the content and shaping the format of the survey form. Once consensus was reached regarding the

survey items, the document was prepared and submitted to the Wisconsin Survey Research Laboratory, University of Wisconsin–Extension (WSRL) for further refinement.

A letter of invitation and explanation was sent by WSRL on behalf of the Task Force to the chief executive officers of the institutions selected to participate in the study. Many of these executives responded positively to the request that they designate contact persons at their institutions to complete the survey form. Contact information was forwarded to the Wisconsin Survey Research Laboratory for its use in disseminating the survey form to the institutions that agreed to participate in the study.

One hundred and ten institutions were invited to participate in the study (see Appendix 3), and seventy-eight completed the survey form. References to the WSRL document are made throughout this report, and that document, *Adult Education Degree Completion Program Practices*, accompanies this report to the Board and is available in the NCA office.

During its third full meeting held on March 3, 2000, the Task Force grappled with the raw data that it received from the WSRL. The Task Force engaged in item analysis and looked for patterns of response. From this study emerged items to be discussed as potential principles of good practice. After extensive deliberations, a set of principles was drafted for further reflection and study. These materials also were shared with persons attending the NCA Annual Meeting, and feedback was solicited.

The fourth meeting of the Task Force held on June 7, 2000, focused on the final report submitted by the Wisconsin Survey Research Laboratory, reconsideration and refinement of the draft principles, the development of the final report (see pages 3-10), and planning the Chair's presentation of the Task Force's report to the Board. It was decided that a copy of the document prepared by the Wisconsin Survey Research Laboratory also would be presented to each Board member, the Executive Director, and members of the NCA staff. Salient items from the WSRL report are presented in the following section of this report.

The Task Force's Response to the Charge Issued by the Board of Trustees

The Board of Trustees charged the Task Force to study the practices and procedures employed in adult degree completion programs, with a special focus on the role of providing credit for prior learning within the programs, and to provide a report to the Commission that

1. Summarizes lessons learned regarding strengths and weaknesses found in adult degree completion programs and the practice of granting academic credit for prior learning;
2. Identifies exemplary principles of good practice that characterize adult degree completion programs and awarding credit for prior learning;
3. Provides an analysis of the impact of these programs and activities on the broader educational activities of institutional providers and the higher education community in general; and
4. Recommends for Board consideration various strategies appropriate for an accrediting commission to ensure quality in these programs and practices without restricting access.

The Task Force's responses are presented later in this report. To develop its findings, conclusions, and recommendations, the Task Force used the survey materials, related literature, feedback from persons attending sessions dealing with the topic at the last two NCA Annual Meetings, the expertise and experience of the Task Force members, and materials related to degree completion programs sent by persons affiliated with such programs.

About the Survey Process

Central to the study was the survey that the Wisconsin Survey Research Laboratory conducted on behalf of the Task Force. The survey was structured around two main questions: (1) *What are the common practices being employed in adult degree completion programs?* (2) *What principles of good practice should be employed in delivering adult degree completion programs?* The ten-page questionnaire consisted of ninety-two items organized into thirteen clusters around the areas of *mission, resources, programs and services, planning, and integrity*. The following topical areas comprised the survey document:

Mission	Facilities	Record Keeping
Faculty Resources	Administration	Curriculum
Learning Resources	Finances	Planning
Support Services	Admission Services	Integrity
	Performance & Assessment	

In processing the data, the WSRL used unweighted frequencies and cross-tabulations. Chi-square tests of significance were run on all cross-tabulations. The mean difference between *importance of a practice* and *consistency of a practice* was computed by subtracting the *importance* rating from the consistency rating of each respondent, then averaging this difference for all respondents. To adapt for positive skew thought to be inherent in surveys of the type used in this study, the researcher elected to use only the respondents' "very consistent" and "very important" ratings (the highest ratings on the scale) as the primary basis for the assumptions reached regarding the data.

Seventy-two percent of the institutions whose contact persons responded to the survey were identified as private institutions, and 24 percent were identified as public institutions; the remaining institutions were not identified according to this descriptor. Thirty-seven percent of the respondents were affiliated with baccalaureate level institutions, and 42 percent were affiliated with master's level institutions. Approximately 10 percent were from institutions that offer one or more doctoral degree programs. The remaining 11 percent fell within the category of specialized institutions or were not specifically identified. The respondents to the survey were persons most often serving as deans, program directors, or chief academic officers, in that order by number.

Part I of the Charge

Lessons Learned Regarding Strengths and Weaknesses Found in Adult Degree Completion Programs and the Practice of Granting Academic Credit for Prior Learning

Through the survey process the Task Force sought to determine from the respondents at the participating institutions how consistent the operations within their respective institutions are with those identified in the survey document, and how important they feel these practices are as principles of good practice. As a frame of reference the Task Force elected to designate as *strengths* or commonly shared institutional practices those survey items that at least 65 percent of the respondents rated as being "very consistent" with existing practices and where there was an "absolute difference" (the difference between the a rating of "very consistent" and "very important") of less than 10 percent. The *strengths* identified are spread across the various topical areas comprising the survey, and no cluster of items emerged as a distinctive area of strength using the 65 percent threshold.

On this basis, the following survey items emerged and were recognized as *strengths* (commonly shared institutional practices):

1. The institution offers only those ADC programs that contribute to its overall mission.
2. The full-time faculty is responsible for approving the courses that comprise ADC programs.

3. Academic standards in ADC programs are determined through the same governance procedures used in the traditionally operated (full semester) programs.
4. Faculty members with appropriate credentials work in the ADC programs that the institution offers.
5. On-line databases are available to students enrolled in ADC programs.
6. The institution's chief academic officer provides administrative oversight for all ADC programs.
7. The costs of operating ADC programs are included in the institution's operations budget.
8. The institution publishes an established curriculum for each of the ADC programs it offers.
9. The institution accepts as a part of its ADC programs academic credits awarded previously by other accredited institutions if no course duplication is determined.
10. Off-campus instruction is offered at sites located conveniently for students enrolled in ADC programs.

Taking into consideration the *strengths* that emerged, the Task Force identified other items or ideas that it feels signal good practice and should be recognized. These include the following:

1. Adult degree completion programs provide opportunity and access to students not traditionally served by higher education.
2. Advocates of adult degree completion program value prior learning as an important component in such degree programs, and they support the use of recognized processes in assessing prior learning.
3. Adult degree completion programs provide formats and learning opportunities that are convenient for students and accommodate their lifestyles.
4. Faculty involved in adult degree completion programs are prepared educationally in both subject areas and pedagogy to facilitate learning by adults.
5. Performance and assessment are basic evaluation activities in adult degree programs where credit is recognized for prior learning and multiple measures (CLEP, ACE evaluations, and portfolio assessment) are used to determine the credit to be awarded.

The Task Force again turned to the survey document, this time to determine the survey items on which the identified common practices and stated levels of importance have their widest gaps of difference. The Task Force identified items rated at 50 percent or less in the "existing category" and having rating gaps of 20 percent or more when compared with the "importance as a practice" category as areas where improvement might need to be considered. The items that follow are cited in a positive context, as they were worded in the survey form; however, it is the incongruity between the ratings in the two categories, "existing practice" and "importance as a practice," that led the Task Force to identify them as items needing attention.

1. The institution views ADC programs as being an integral part of its curricular offerings.
2. The institution values adult learning.
3. Faculty and academic professionals working in ADC programs share a commitment to serve adult learners.
4. Full-time faculty members who work in ADC programs participate in professional development activities that focus on the needs of adult learners.
5. Part-time faculty members who work in ADC programs participate in professional development activities that focus on the needs of adult learners.
6. Members of the Support Services staff are available at times convenient to students who are enrolled in on-ground ADC programs.

7. Members of the Support Services staff are available at times convenient to students who are enrolled in on-line ADC courses.
8. A portion of the funds generated through student enrollment in ADC programs is reallocated to these programs for purposes of program enhancement.
9. Information gathered through the institution's assessment program is used in making improvements in its ADC programs.
10. The ADC programs are evaluated regularly to ensure that they remain current and relevant.

The Task Force concluded that when institutional support is not forthcoming relative these items, weakness such as the following may emerge:

1. Adult degree completion programs are operated as appendages if they are not integrated into the whole of the institution.
2. Adult degree completion programs are unlikely to be outcomes based.
3. Insufficient professional development activities are made available for faculty and staff.
4. Adult degree completion programs that are not integrated into the institution's culture receive little attention in areas such as governance, budgeting and planning, faculty involvement, peer recognition, and the sharing of resources.

Part II of the Charge

Exemplary Principles of Good Practice That Characterize Adult Degree Completion Programs and the Awarding of Credit for Prior Learning

In constructing the survey document, the Task Force identified ninety-two items that it thought were indicators of positive performance relative to the operation of adult degree completion programs. Based in large measure on the responses to the survey, the Task Force derived a group of what it considers to be *principles of good practice*. The items appear here as a recommendation to the Board for consideration and endorsement as a set of *principles of good practice*.

Recommended Principles of Good Practice in Adult Degree Completion Programs to be Observed by NCA Institutions and Reviewed for Patterns of Evidence by Consultant-Evaluators

Mission

The *adult degree completion programs* are consistent with and integral to the institution's mission.

Resources

Faculty members share a commitment to serve adult learners, bring appropriate credentials to their work assignments, and participate in determining policies that govern *adult degree completion programs*.

Full-time and part-time faculty members who work in *adult degree completion programs* participate in professional development activities that focus on the needs of adult learners.

The institution provides an adequate organizational structure, administrative support, and financial resources to ensure the effectiveness of *adult degree completion programs*.

Adequate institutional resources are committed to the *adult degree completion programs* to ensure quality and appropriate student services.

The institution provides timely and adequate access to the range of student services—including admissions, financial aid, academic advising, delivery of course materials, and counseling and placement services—needed to ensure academic success.

These principles were adopted by the Board of Trustees of the Commission on June 22, 2000.

The institution ensures access to learning resources, technology, and facilities to support its *adult degree completion programs*.

Educational Programs and Other Services

The *adult degree completion programs* that the institution offers are in subject areas that are consistent with the institution's mission.

The *adult degree completion programs* have clearly stated requirements and outcomes in the areas of the major and general education.

Adult degree completion programs and courses that are offered in distance delivery modalities conform to the *Guidelines for Distance Education* cited in the *NCA Handbook for Accreditation*.

The assessment of student learning outcomes is a standard practice in all *adult degree completion programs* and is linked to program improvement.

The institution uses a variety of acceptable methodologies [e.g., examinations in subject areas; assessment of prior learning using principles advocated by organizations such as the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL), the American Council on Education (ACE), the Adult Higher Education Alliance, and the Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSA/CHE)], and its faculty is trained in how to use and apply these methods.

Multiple measures (portfolio assessment, capstone courses, oral examinations, juried examinations, standardized national exams, locally developed tests, performance on licensure, and certification/professional exams) are used are to assess the learning outcomes of students enrolled in *adult degree completion programs*.

Adult degree completion programs address students' education and career goals at the time of re-entry and throughout the degree completion process in order to assess the learning they will need and to help them reach their goals.

Planning

Consideration of *adult degree completion programs* is integrated into the institution's planning and evaluation processes in order to ensure continuous improvement in the offerings.

Integrity

The institution has processes in place to ensure that the *adult degree completion programs* it sponsors are offered with integrity and are responsive to learners and the community.

The institution that partners with another organization to deliver an *adult degree completion program* is knowledgeable of the "Good Practices in Contractual Arrangements Involving Courses and Programs" published by the NCA Commission on Institutions of Higher Education and uses the document as a guide in ensuring the integrity of its program.

The Task Force also recommended adoption of the Guidelines for Assessing Prior Learning for Credit developed by the Middle States Commission on Higher Education as a tool that can be used to assess and award credit for prior learning. The guidelines are as follows:

Assessing Prior Learning for Credit*

1. Make clear basic principles and values held by the institution regarding credit for prior learning.
2. Provide explicit guidelines as to what is considered college-level learning.
3. Make clear that credit can be awarded only for demonstrated college-level *learning*, not for *experience* per se.

* These guidelines were taken from the policy statement, *Assessing Prior Learning for Credit*, approved by the Middle States Commission on Higher Education. They are used with that Commission's permission.

These guidelines were adopted by the Board of Trustees of the Commission on June 22, 2000.

4. Specify, as clearly and unambiguously as possible, the standards of acceptable performance in each academic area.
5. Specify what form the claim for credit should take, e.g., course equivalent, competency list.
6. Insure that evaluation of learning is undertaken by appropriately qualified persons.
7. Indicate the appropriate form such as semester hours, course units, etc., the evaluator's credit recommendation should take.
8. Specify which degree requirements may be met by prior learning.
9. Specify how credit for prior learning will be recorded.
10. Define and articulate roles and responsibilities of all persons connected with the assessment process.
11. Develop procedures to monitor and assure fair and consistent treatment of students.
12. Develop clearly stated assessment policies and descriptive information for students, faculty, administrators and external sources.
13. Include provisions for periodic re-evaluation of policies and procedures for assessing learning and awarding credit.
14. Advise students that the institution cannot guarantee the transferability of prior learning credits to another institution.
15. Develop evaluation procedures of overall prior learning assessment program to ensure quality.

Part III of the Charge

The Impact of Adult Degree Completion Programs and Related Activities on the Broader Educational Activities of Institutional Providers and the Higher Education Community in General

Adult learners are rapidly becoming the new majority on many college and university campuses as well as in virtual settings. This phenomenon brings with it both opportunities and challenges. The Task Force recognizes the emergence of new paradigms in higher education as they apply to learning styles, learning environments, and access to learning. The changes that are occurring in the educational landscape, especially as they relate to adult learners, are being written about with great frequency (see Selected Bibliography), and the Task Force identified some that it thinks are having a significant impact:

1. Working adults are seeking access to lifelong learning opportunities and expect the higher education community to be responsive to their needs and wishes.
2. More and more institutions are responding to the needs of their communities and other constituencies by providing adult degree completion programs.
3. Programs designed for adult learners expand opportunities for collaboration among higher education institutions as well as with private-sector and public-sector organizations
4. With the increasing number of working adults seeking higher learning, faculty members and other facilitators of learning are being challenged to engage in professional development activities that keep them current in their areas of expertise and competent in the use of technology as a learning aid.
5. Adult learners need student support services, as do traditional-age students and institutions are challenged to ensure that the configuration and scope of these services are reflective of the needs older students have.

6. Programs designed to attract adult learners and respond to their needs must be operated with integrity as it relates to curricular content and academic performance.
7. Programs designed for adult learners should be integrated into an institution's curricular offerings and should not be an appendage that is directed and delivered by persons not tied to the institution's traditional program offerings.
8. The institution's program in the assessment of student learning and performance should be inclusive of its adult degree completion program, and the findings derived from such evaluations should be used for purposes of improvement in both student learning and program content.
9. Institutions committed to conducting effective adult degree completion programs seek to be innovative in responding to the diverse needs that adults bring to the learning environment. As a result, opportunities emerge for the design and development of new delivery formats, curriculum and instruction packages, assessment methods, and professional development activities that can benefit both students and faculty.

Part IV of the Charge

Strategies Appropriate for an Accrediting Commission to Use in Ensuring Quality in Adult Degree Completion Programs and Practices Without Restricting Access

During the course of this study, it was abundantly clear to the Task Force that adult degree completion programs are an important segment of programs designed for adult learners. Therefore, it is reasonable to expect institutions that consciously seek to serve the needs of adult learners to do so with integrity and commitment, and to invest resources and support structures that ensure quality outcomes. The Task Force recommends that the Board of Trustees of the NCA Commission on Institutions of Higher Education employ the strategies listed here as a means of encouraging and ensuring that institutions maintain quality in the adult degree completion programs they offer.

1. Adopt the *Principles of Good Practice in Adult Degree Completion Programs* developed by the Task Force as a conceptual framework in which institutions should develop and operate such programs. (See pages 6–7.)
2. Adopt the *Guidelines for Assessing Prior Learning for Credit* developed by the Middle States Commission on Higher Education as a tool institutions can use to assess and award credit for college level learning achieved outside the institutional setting. (See page 7.)
3. Endorse the *Principles of Good Practice for Alternative and External Degree Programs for Adults* (American Council on Education and the Adult Higher Education Alliance) as guidelines that institutions and evaluation teams can use in determining, respectively, how to operate programs and how to determine their effectiveness. (See Appendix 4.)
4. Endorse the *Principles of Effectiveness* (Council for Adult and Experiential Learning) as guidelines that institutions can use in their efforts to serve and meet the needs of adult learners. (See Appendix 5.)
5. Require evaluation teams to review the efficacy of adult degree completion programs (as they do more traditional programs) in the context of the institution's overall mission and curricular offerings, and in reference to each criterion for accreditation.
6. Expect institutional self-studies to reflect attention to the evaluation of adult degree completion programs similar to that directed toward the evaluation of more traditional programs.
7. Encourage the continuation of studies addressing issues related to the education of adult learners in both traditional and new markets.

Conclusion

Lifelong learning is not a catch-phrase or a fad but rather a trend that marks a significant change in the behavior of increasing numbers of adults who have come to value the need for continuous learning. With changes in the educational community and within the private and public sectors, institutions see opportunities for enrollment growth, increased revenue streams, more focused or expanded missions, outreach to new service areas, new research vistas, and other benefits. While pursuing these opportunities, institutions must also assess the needs and demands that are associated with them. It is in this context that comprehensive attention must be given to the evolving adult degree completion program phenomenon and its impact on institutions.

Much is happening in the adult education movement today, and institutions can ill-afford to operate adult degree completion programs on the periphery of their traditional curricula. Each institution must decide the scope of the business it is in, and plan and operate accordingly. An institution's mission should articulate its vision, purposes, and goals so that the programs and services offered are reflective thereof. Resource bases need to be adequate to support all program offerings, not allowing program mix to be determined solely by the number of "cash cows" that are available. Student learning must be the focus of educational efforts, and the evaluation of student learning must be viewed as the bedrock on which programs and services are built and improved. Institutions that plan well know best who they are, the environments in which they operate, and the constituencies they serve. They act with integrity as they serve the common good.

Accrediting agencies that work to assure and advance quality higher learning also are presented with new opportunities and challenges as they respond to institutions and the other constituencies they serve. The changing educational landscape affects the work of evaluators, and their review processes must be discriminating, relevant, and comprehensive. In this context, the Task Force on Adult Degree Completion Programs recommends that the Board of Trustees endorse or embrace a set of *Principles of Good Practice* that its member institutions and consultant-evaluators may use as a reference when they perform their responsibilities and fulfill their commitments to service.

Appendix 1

Charge Issued by the Board of Trustees of the Commission on Institutions of Higher Education North Central Association of Colleges and Schools to the Task Force on Adult Completion Programs and the Award of Academic Credit for Prior Learning at the Undergraduate Level

The Board of Trustees of the Commission on Institutions of Higher Education hereby establishes a fifteen-member Task Force to study the practices and procedures currently being used by its member institutions that have adult degree completion programs and award of academic credit for prior learning at the undergraduate level. From this study the Task Force is to provide advice to the Board of Trustees about options appropriate to assure quality in these programs and the practices involved in them.

In determining the need for special task forces such as this one, the Board of Trustees agrees that the membership of the Task Force should be established, a clear charge to the Task Force should be approved, an unambiguous timeline should be established, and a budget should be developed to support the work of the Task Force.

CHARGE TO THE TASK FORCE

The Board calls on the Task Force to study the practices and procedures employed in adult degree completion programs with a special focus on the role of providing credit for prior learning within the programs. From this study, it is to provide a report to the Commission that

- (1) Summarizes lessons learned regarding strengths and weaknesses found in adult degree completion programs and the practice of granting academic credit for prior learning;
- (2) Identifies exemplary principles of good practice that characterize each of these educational services—adult degree completion programs, and awarding academic credit for prior learning;
- (3) Provides an analysis of the impact of these programs and activities on the broader educational activities of institutional providers and the higher education community in general; and
- (4) Recommends for Board consideration various strategies appropriate for an accrediting commission to ensure quality in these programs and practices without restricting access.

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Appendix 2

Task Force on Adult Degree Completion Programs and Academic Credit for Prior Learning at the Undergraduate Level

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Appendix 3

Institutions Responding to the Survey Inquiry About Participating in the Study

Name of Institution	State	Name of Institution	State	Name of Institution	State
Anderson University	IN	Fort Lewis College	CO	Shepherd College	WV
Antioch University Los Angeles	CA	Goshen College	IN	Silver Lake College	WI
Baker College	MI	Governors State University	IL	Southern Illinois University at Carbondale	IL
Baker University	KS	Grace University	NE	Southwestern College of Christian Ministries	OK
Baldwin-Wallace College	OH	Grand Canyon University	AZ	Spring Arbor College	MI
Bellevue University	NE	Greenville College	IL	Tabor College	KS
Benedictine University	IL	Heidelberg College	OH	Tiffin University	OH
Blackburn College	IL	Huntington College	IN	Tri-State University	IN
Bluefield State College	WV	Huron University	SD	Trinity Christian College	IL
Calvin College	MI	Indiana Institute of Technology	IN	Trinity International University	IL
Capital University	OH	Indiana University	IN	University of Arizona	AZ
Cardinal Stritch University	WI	Indiana Wesleyan University	IN	University of Arkansas, Fayetteville	AR
Carroll College	WI	John Brown University	AR	University of Dayton	OH
Cedarville College	OH	Judson College	IL	University of Iowa	IA
Central Michigan University	MI	Kansas State University	KS	University of Mary	ND
Chicago State University	IL	Lakeland College	WI	University of Saint Francis	IL
Cleary College	MI	Loyola University of Chicago	IL	University of Sioux Falls	SD
Cleveland College of Jewish Studies	OH	Madonna University	MI	University of Southern Indiana	IN
College of Mount St. Joseph	OH	Malone College	OH	University of Toledo	OH
College of Saint Mary	NE	Marshall University	WV	University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh	WI
College of Saint Scholastica, the	MN	Metropolitan State University	MN	University of Wisconsin-Platteville	WI
College of Santa Fe	NM	Mid-America Nazarene University	KS	University of Wisconsin-Superior	WI
College of West Virginia, the	WV	National American University	SD	Urbana University	OH
Colorado Christian University	CO	North Park University	IL	Walsh University	OH
Concordia College	MI	Northwestern College	MN	West Virginia State College	WV
Concordia University	NE	Ohio Dominican College	OH	West Virginia University	WV
Concordia University	MN	Ohio University	OH	Western Illinois University	IL
Concordia University	IL	Ohio Valley College	WV	Western Michigan University	MI
Concordia University Wisconsin	WI	Oklahoma Baptist University	OK	Wheeling Jesuit University	WV
Cornerstone University	MI	Oklahoma City University	OK	William Tyndale College	MI
Doane College	NE	Olivet Nazarene University	IL	William Woods University	MO
Eastern Illinois University	IL	Ottawa University	KS	Wilmington College	OH
Elmhurst College	IL	Prescott College	AZ	Xavier University	OH
Fairmont State College	WV	Saint Mary College	KS		
Fontbonne College	MO	Saint Xavier University	IL		

Note: This list should not be construed to mean that all of the institutions identified here operate adult degree completion programs as defined in this study. It was from this list of contacted institutions, however, that the survey participants came.

Appendix 4

Overview of the Principles of Good Practice for Alternative and External Degree Program for Adults*

1. The program has a mission statement that reflects an educational philosophy, goals, purposes, and general intent and clearly complements the institutional mission.
2. Faculty and academic professionals working in alternative and external degree programs share a commitment to serve adult learners and have the attitudes, knowledge, and skills required to reach, advise, counsel, and assist such students.
3. Clearly articulated programmatic learning outcomes frame the comprehensive curriculum as well as specific learning experiences; in developing these outcomes, the program incorporates general student goals.
4. The program is designed to provide diverse learning experiences that respond to the characteristics and contexts of adult learners while meeting established academic standards.
5. The assessment of a student's learning is used to determine the achievement of comprehensive and specific learning outcomes.

*These statements are taken from the document, *Principles of Good Practice for Alternative and External Degree Programs for Adults*, published by the American Council on Education and the Alliance: An Association for Alternative Degree Programs for Adults, 1990.

Note: The organizational name of the Alliance was changed to the Adult Higher Education Alliance in 1998.

*These principles
were endorsed by the
Board of Trustees of the
Commission on June 22, 2000.*

Appendix 5

Principles of Effectiveness for Serving Adult Learners in Higher Education*

Outreach: The institution conducts its outreach to adult learners by overcoming barriers in time, place, and tradition in order to create lifelong access to educational opportunities.

Life and Career Planning: The institution addresses adult learners' life and career goals before or at the onset of enrollment in order to assess and align its capacities to help learners reach their goals.

Financing: The institution promotes choice using an array of payment options for adult learners in order to expand equity and financial flexibility.

Assessment of Learning Outcomes: The institution defines and assesses the knowledge, skills, and competencies acquired by adult learners both from the curriculum and from life/work experience in order to assign credit and confer degrees with rigor.

Teaching-Learning Process: The institution's faculty uses multiple methods of instruction (including experiential and problem-based methods) for adult learners in order to connect curricular concepts to useful knowledge and skills.

Student Support Systems: The institution assists adult learners using comprehensive academic and student support systems in order to enhance students' capacities to become self-directed, lifelong learners.

Technology: The institution uses information technology to provide relevant and timely information and to enhance the learning experience

Strategic Partnerships: The institution engages in strategic relationships, partnerships, and collaborations with employers and other organizations in order to develop and improve educational opportunities for adult learners.

*These statements are taken from the Principles of Effectiveness for Serving Adult Learners in Higher Education, by Thomas A. Flint, as published in CAEL Forum and News, Spring 2000, pages 10–15.

*These principles
were endorsed by the
Board of Trustees of the
Commission on June 22, 2000.*

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