

Focus on their Strengths: Recruiting & Retaining Online Adult Learners in a Hyper-Competitive Environment

Scott Amundsen, PhD

Winthrop University, US

Abstract: Institutions are aggressively recruiting adult learners and developing adult degree completion programs. This is a hyper-competitive market. Many institutions lack experience working with this population. This paper outlines proven strength-based enrollment management strategies to instill confidence and provide student support for adult learners. Institutions can get ahead by focusing on andragogical principles including prior learning assessment. Individual attention and concierge-style support are paramount to enrolling adult learners. A commitment to strength-based / appreciative approaches is the key to retaining them. Faculty members and student services professionals must understand that adult learners are a special population that cannot be served in the same manner as the under 18–24-year-old students.

Keywords: Adult Education, Strengths, Adult-Degree Completion, Andragogy

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Introduction

Colleges and universities are competing to enroll adult students. According to a recent Gray & Associates report (Rowles, 2023), only half of Americans (117 million) over 25 years old have earned a Bachelor's degree. Over 64 million people have earned college credits, but not finished their degree programs. Although there is no shortage of adult student prospects, enrollments are declining. This is in part due to the lack of understanding of the supports this population requires.

Why are adults reluctant to return to school? Traditional higher education institutions are not prepared to support the working adult. Adults tend to have more responsibilities (work, family, etc.), and fewer resources (time, money, support networks) than students who go straight to college from high school. In order to compete institutions need to develop strength-based adult degree completion programs to attract and retain students.

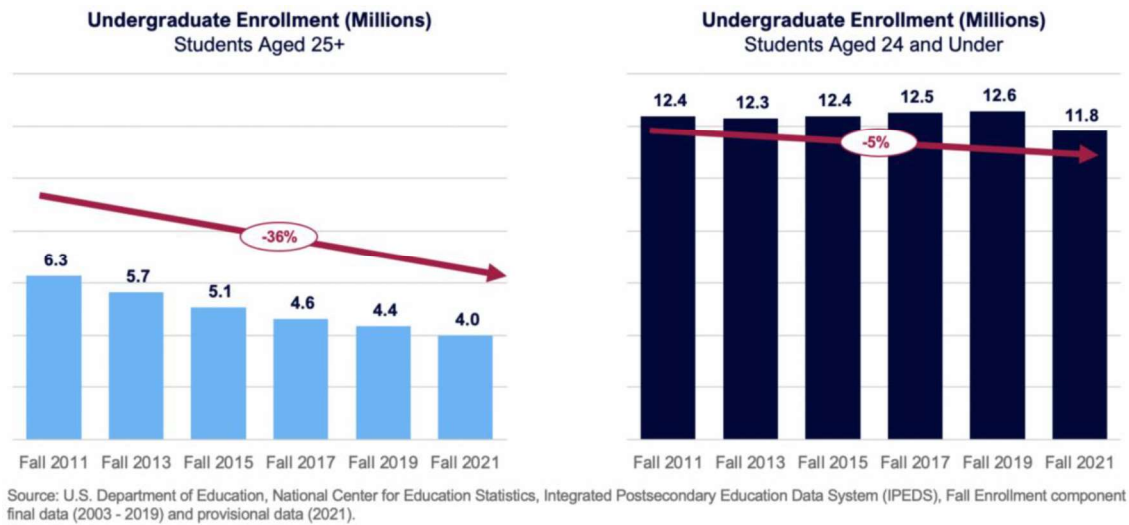


Figure 1. Enrollment Trends

Recruiting/Admission

Prospective adult students are looking for advocates that can demystify the college process. According to Schritter (2019) students matriculating to college right out of high school are more confident about their ability to graduate than those who return as adults or start later in life. If the admissions process is overcomplicated or tedious, adult students are unlikely to matriculate.

A recent study (Hatcher, 2023) conducted by the American Institute on Research (AIR), found that students rely on one key *information broker* to guide them through the enrollment process. They are viewed as a reliable source that assists the prospective student in gathering information and navigating the admissions process. This could include, but would not be limited to, applying for admission, requesting transcripts, evaluating past college work, understanding graduation requirements, registering for classes, and getting required texts from the bookstore. This person should be available when the student is available. In hybrid and in-person programs students may need additional information regarding immunizations or parking permits. Bertolini (2020) defines this as *conciierge* approach to serving adult learners.

This college representative should intentionally focus on the student strengths and positive past performances. A key concept in Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider & Whitney, 1999) is that all of our questions are fateful. By asking intentionally positive questions, like “Tell me about a recent peak learning performance, how did it happen, who was involved, why was it so successful?,” students will gain confidence and continue to seek out the college representative. Clifton and Rath (2015) simplify this concept by stating that every conversation is either positive or negative, using the analogy of a bucket and a shovel. There is no such thing as a neutral question, neutral equals negative. You are either filling your student’s bucket or dipping out of their bucket. By focusing on what is right in their world, you are much more likely to get them to enroll.

Prior Learning Assessment

Prior Learning Assessment should be addressed during the admission process. Recognizing what a student already knows aligns with the principles of Andragogy (Knowles, 1984).

Andragogy: The Art and Science of Helping Adults Learn



(Instructional Design Australia)

Figure 2. Principles of Andragogy

Focusing on the area of *Experience* and how that aligns with Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) is a good starting point. Adults have breadth and depth of experiences to draw on and apply to new learning (Knowles, 1984). Nothing will frustrate adult learners more than being required to take courses with content that they already have mastered. The best way to acknowledge an adult student’s past learning experiences and personal strengths is through credit award.

Institutions can offer a wide range of opportunities in PLA. Adult learners earning PLA credit are more likely to complete their degree program than those not earning PLA credit (Klein-Collins, et. al, 2020). These may include standardized examinations (CLEP, DSST, Prometric), departmental challenge examinations, portfolio assessment, credit for corporate training, or credit for specific licenses or certification (Klein-Collins, et. al, 2020).

Military Credit

According to a recent CAEL study (Klein-Collins et. al, 2020) the most common PLA credit earned by adult learners is military credit recorded on a Joint Services Transcript (JST). Credit recommendations on the JST are

assessed by the American Council of Education (ACE). Awarding credit for military training and completion of service schools recognizes student knowledge and achievement.

Portfolio Assessment

Portfolios are another common PLA method for earning credit. This approach requires students to present their learning, knowledge, and skills in a portfolio. This is a strength-related activity in that students are submitting their best work, while revisiting past peak performances. This process requires both faculty member buy-in and strong facilitation. It would be ideal if the same information broker mentioned above guided the adult learner through the portfolio process.

Building Positive Psychology & Strengths into the Curriculum

Building intentional strength-based assignments into the curriculum is an excellent strategy when developing courses for adults. The Valued in Action (VIA) Survey of Character Strengths is a 240-item survey designed for adults (Peterson and Seligman, 2004). The VIA Character Strengths Survey is built on the work of Dr. Martin Seligman in Positive Psychology. By identifying and understanding character strengths, students will increase their level of positive emotions therefore improving performance (Seligman, 2002).

Frederickson's Broaden and Build Theory (1998) also supports the positive psychology approach. This theory reinforces that focusing on positive emotions, in turn build their personal resources over time, creating a positive cycle of well being. . This inversion creates a broadening of awareness that is essential for the individual to build both psychological and tangible resources. Table 1 displays the specific effects of positive orientation upon an individual's experience.

Strength-based Instruction

Adult students benefit from working with faculty members who have been trained in Appreciative or Strength-based approaches. A recent study involving military students enrolled in an adult degree completion program found that that positive, supportive, and encouraging language in both in and out-of-classroom communications can help students find motivation in completing their courses and programs using manageable action steps (Amundsen, et al., 2021).

Faculty members teaching adult learners should be familiar with the andragogy model. Assignments that are repeatedly connected to the adult learner's real-world experiences are best practice (Galustyan et al., 2019). This relates closely to the Orientation phase of Andragogy (Knowles, 2004). Adult learners are encouraged to reflect on past peak performances. The focus is on practical learning that will benefit them in the immediate future.

Strength-based Advising & Student Services

There are a variety of strength-based advising models that would benefit adult student populations. Schreiner and Anderson (2005) were pioneers in the strengths-based advising movement. Their work with Gallup CliftonStrengths (formerly Strengthsfinder), significantly impacted the Strengths and the First-Year Experience. This instrument has been used with traditional and adult student populations. It has also been widely used in corporate and civic organizations.

Appreciative Advising is another major strength-based movement. Appreciative Advising draws from Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider) and other strengths-based approaches. After proving successful with at-risk and underrepresented populations (Kamphoff, et al., 2007), Appreciative Advising has become a popular approach nationwide (Bloom, et al. 2009). Advisors ask open-ended intentionally positive questions and encourage students to reflect on past peak performances. This approach builds confidence and self-efficacy. The Appreciative Advising Framework can be seen below.

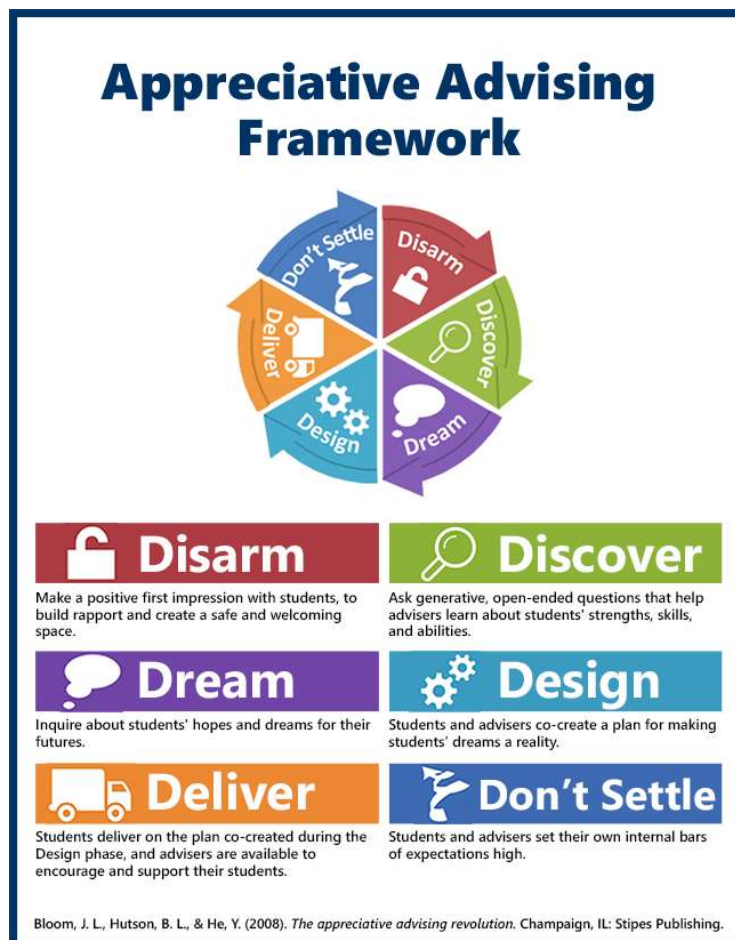


Figure 3. Appreciative Advising Framework

Conclusion

Colleges and universities have an opportunity to increase their enrollments by intentionally recruiting adult learners. It is critical that institutions understand the unique needs of this population and must be intentional with their enrollment management and curricular approaches. This paper makes the case for strengths-based approaches from pre-enrollment through graduation. Institutions must respect the previous learning experiences of this population and aggressively work to develop Prior Learning Assessment strategies. Student services personnel and faculty members teaching adult learners should embrace the andragogical principles and engage in professional development relating to strength-based and appreciative programming.

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