

An Online Adult-Learner Focused Program: An Assessment of Effectiveness

Curtis L. Todd

Atlanta Metropolitan State College
ctodd@atlm.edu

Kokila Ravi

Atlanta Metropolitan State College
kravi@atlm.edu

Harry Akoh

Atlanta Metropolitan State College
hakoh@atlm.edu

Vance Gray

Atlanta Metropolitan State College
vgray@atlm.edu

Abstract

The landscape of higher education has significantly changed. Methods of instructional delivery, student profiles and degree offerings have transformed traditional brick and mortar institutions. Distance educational courses and programs, either fully online or hybrid, have been a major contributing factor in this shift. While a high percentage of students take classes online, adult learners particularly benefit from the flexibility and accessibility offered by online education. Yet, adult learners are more likely to be intimidated because of their lack of familiarity with this new learning paradigm. This article examines online and adult learners programming as well as strategies to address their needs, and presents the results of an evaluation that examined the effectiveness of an Online Adult Learner-Focused Program. The program was developed at a small public college in the southeast area of the United States and consisted of 97 respondents. The results of the study found various levels of student satisfaction with online adult learner-focused courses and as it relates to meeting the objectives of the program. Implications and recommendations for instructors, program coordinators and administrators are also discussed.

Introduction

The growth of distance education has been revolutionary and transformative, changing the way instruction is provided, students learn, and institutions position themselves in order to remain competitive and relevant (Kriger, 2001). Further, online courses that are adult-learner focused address some of the pressing needs facing institutions of higher learning and students: access, convenience, quality and rigor, and enhanced pedagogy. Increased demands for online degree programs and courses, and the added focus on adult learners must be met with evidence-based practices designed to improve teaching effectiveness and student learning outcomes (Allen & Seaman, 2014). Once courses and programs are designed and launched, it becomes imperative that they are appropriately and accurately assessed for effectiveness (Wang, 2006).

How do we know if students are satisfied in important areas such as engagement, interaction, resources and workload? Are we meeting the unique needs of adult learners with their reentry into academia? Are our programs meeting their objectives? Also, how are these students performing in comparison to peers in face-to-face courses? There is a need to demonstrate effectiveness (Koenig, 2010). This study seeks to address these questions, and contribute to the expanding literature involving adult learners and distance

education, as well as offer strategies to improve program goals, policies and assessments.

Adult Learners

The definition of an adult learner will vary depending on the situation and setting. There are, however, many commonalities that exist in higher education. Generally, they are undergraduate and graduate students ages 25 and older (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2012). They are not a monolithic group, rather each individual is unique with varied abilities, educational backgrounds, family and job responsibilities, as well as life experiences (Southern Regional Education Board, 2015). In response to the shift of having more adult learners in the classroom, campuses are seeking and implementing strategies to address their needs. Central to these efforts, which inform practical and theoretical approaches to learning, are six assumptions about adult learners delineated by Knowles, Swanson and Holton (2005, p.4):

1. Learner's Need to Know
2. Self-Concept of the Learner
3. Prior Experience of the Learner
4. Readiness to Learn
5. Orientation to Learning
6. Motivation to Learn

The challenge in understanding the needs of adult learners, an understudied topic in post-secondary research, has been their rapid growth on campuses. According to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center Snapshot Reports (2012), 38 percent of all postsecondary students are adult learners. These Snapshot Reports are issued during the year and are based on information provided to the Clearinghouse from more than the 3,300 participating postsecondary institutions. The 38 percent represents a steady increase over the past decade (National Center for Education Statistics, 2007). Further, the increase also is in the number of adult learners enrolled in college full time. Additional important conclusions of the Snapshot Report revealed that "on average for three years 54 percent of adult learners age 25-29 were full-time students; 34 percent of adult learners age 40 and over were full-time students; and about 66 percent of adult learners were enrolled in public institutions" (National Center for Education Statistics, 2007).

Distance Education

Distance education courses and programs are offered primarily through online and or video conferencing. As noted by Koenig (2010), the delivery consists of "student-instructor interaction and student-content interaction asynchronously or synchronously through the Internet" (p. 13). Institutions that offer only select courses online, as well as those that offer fully online programs are also becoming more informed and sensitive to the needs of this population. Wang (2006) argued that "competition is also intensifying as traditional publicly funded universities, the new for-profit, post-secondary institutions, corporate universities, and training companies contend for "knowledge workers" who are ready and willing to pay for skill upgrade" (p.273). Additionally, the challenge for institutions is to provide a robust offering of appropriate online courses, as well as programs that are high in quality, yet financially accessible to students.

The Report "Changing Course: Ten Years of Tracking Online Education in the United States" by Allen and Seaman (2013), captures the survey results involving of over 2,800 academic leaders. Significant report results include:

- Over 6.7 million students were taking at least one online course during the fall 2011 term, an increase of 570,000 students over the previous year (p. 17);
- Thirty-two percent of higher education students now take at least one course online (p. 19);
- Over three-quarters of academic leaders believe online is "just as good as" or better (p. 28);

And a continuing concern among academic leaders at all types of institutions has been their belief that lower retention rates in online courses are a barrier to the growth of online instruction (p. 30).

Since 2011, online education has seen rapid growth in enrollment (21%) when compared with 2% increase in on campus enrollment opening key opportunities (Bates, 2011). However, limiting speedy progress of online learning is attributed to several factors like faculty resistance and limited institutional support and funding; lack of faculty training and ineffective online course design have been identified as especially critical. Dr. Tony Bates, an internationally renowned educator and researcher in online learning, identified in his 2011 Report “Outlook for Online Learning and Distance Education” that opportunities for growth and development in online learning exists in the areas of course design, inclusion of multimedia resources, and the utilization of data from learning analytics (pp. 13-15). The business of educating students has changed and will never be the same again. Distance education has become a sustainable method for offering courses and degree programs from the associates through doctorate education.

The Need for Best Practices and Standards

Wang (2006) argued that best practices are works in progress and that “As practitioners and theorists continue their efforts to explore new venues to assess quality of online programs, no doubt more examples of best practices will continue to emerge” (p. 273). These standards, policies and procedures are benchmarks that measure educational quality. Traditionally, Wang suggested, regional and national accreditation agencies have set the guidelines with the following agencies providing the most followed for quality online education: the Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions; the American Federation of Teachers; and the Council for Higher Education Accreditation. Collectively these agencies, as noted by Wang (2006, p. 270), highlighted several key areas as guides for institutions:

- (1) Strong institutional commitment
- (2) Adequate curriculum and instruction that fit the new delivery medium and match the rigor and breadth of equivalent on-campus program
- (3) Sufficient faculty support
- (4) Ample student support
- (5) Consistent learning outcome assessment

Further, two of the essential areas for ensuring quality are faculty development and course design (Quality Matters, 2014). Each area must be met with consistency and places students at the center of our efforts to improve online teaching and learning.

Clearly, the opportunity exists where both, adult learners and online instruction could provide robust discussions as separate variables. Each presents unique and challenging areas of exploration. The significance of this study and article is the assessment of their pairing as a program in a higher educational setting. This type of program must also submit to the scrutiny afforded by rigorous evaluation and assessments that test its efficacy. The remainder of the article proceeds with a more in depth review of best standards for adult learners, as well as for online teaching and learning; the methodology and the results of the study; limitations; a discussion of salient and associated features that advance the overarching purpose of the article; and concludes with useful recommendations for instructors, program coordinators and college administrators.

Adult Learners: Best Practices and Standards

The definition of adult learners is as broad and diverse as the learners themselves. But there are some common factors in the varying definitions used by colleges and universities across the United States. According to the Council of Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) (2013), very few people today move directly from high school to college. So for adult learners, while age is a determinant, it is one among many other signifiers. The guiding definition for an adult learner in the Program that is the subject of this study was someone who is 25 years old and beyond and or has adult responsibilities such as work and family

commitment.

The focus of this section is the exploration of best practices and standards surrounding adult learners. However, consideration must be first given to the theories governing how learners learn and then establish the ways that adult fit or deviate from that norm. In the seminal publication, *How Learning Works: 7 Research-Based Principles for Smart Teaching*, Ambrose et al., (2010) argued that students' prior knowledge, the way students organize knowledge, students' motivation, practice and feedback, course climate and becoming self-directed learners are the key components that affect their learning.

The evidence from Ambrose et al., (2010) is conclusive on the fact that prior knowledge can either hinder or promote learning. Students of all types will interact with a new concept or word based on the prior knowledge they bring to it. The specific aspects of prior knowledge adults bring to the course may sometimes prevent them from fully grasping and integrating new concepts. It is for these reasons that it is recommended that an assessment is conducted of the prior knowledge of all learners. This is particularly acute for adult learners who have extensive experiential knowledge but lack the theoretical foundation.

According to the leading expert of adult learning (there is significant opposition to the use of the word andragogy) Malcolm Knowles (1990), there are 5 essential principles associated with adult learning. These include: self-motivation, readiness to learn, self-directed learners, prior knowledge and mastery. For adult learners, part of the reason why they return to school can be explained based on the principle of motivation (Knowles, 1984). Students who are motivated generally do better whether the motivation is purely for self-improvement or for work related purposes. According to the scholarship, this is one area where adult learners may not have a problem, so instructors could tap into their motivation to help them improve their learning.

A comparison of the two approaches (7 research based principles which guide teaching and the 5 doctrines about how adults learn) reveal that there are many areas of intersectionality. The Online Adult Learner-Focused Program adopted all common areas between these two and incorporated them in the design and delivery of our adult learner online courses. The main areas identified included adult focused delivery, course content based on context of life experiences, course goals with emphasis on practice, and a curriculum with guided online instruction and enhanced academic support. The adult learner focused courses offered in the Program utilized the philosophy that adult learners' prior knowledge can be a great tool for learning if it is checked for accuracy and students are encouraged to bring their life experiences into what they study. Since learning best occurs when students incorporate new information into existing structures of memory, this approach was grounded in that scholarship (Caffarella & Barnett, 1994).

Course objectives are usually written to meet certain standards such as measurability and appropriateness to students' level of knowledge (Quality Matters Rubric, 2014). But writing them from the perspective of the student is critically important. This does not only mean writing in a manner that all students could understand, but from the perspective of an online adult-learner focused course, it does require that course goals or objectives emphasize practice. Students should be able to understand but also see how the information they are learning will be relevant in their lives. The instructor in an adult learner-focused online course therefore has to be present to provide guidance and direction consistently for learners as they bring their previous experiences to the classroom. Academic support becomes relevant for adult learners, since it assists them in becoming self-directed learners and gain mastery of new and challenging concepts and ideas. Because some adult learners may have been away from the classroom for some time, providing targeted support to help them catch up gives them responsibility over their own learning. This is an essential tool to gain mastery over new concepts and key ideas (Ambrose et al., 2010).

Online Teaching and Learning: Best Practices and Standards

This section explores the scholarship and best practices in online teaching. Traditionally, the focus of the classroom has always been on the techniques and tools for delivering course content (Boettcher, 2011). But today it has been shown that such an approach which concentrates on what the instructor is doing is

inadequate because it misplaces the focus on how students are interacting with the course content and with each other (Boettcher & Conrad, 2010). The scholarship on learning recommends that the focus should be on the learners. How is the learner interacting with content? What are the thought processes of the learner? Does the learner collaborate with other learners and course instructor(s) on a consistent and frequent basis?

The renewed focus on learners does not imply excluding any attention from the enumerated core factors which determine the quality of an online or blended course. These include institutional infrastructure, student readiness, faculty preparedness, course content, course design versus course delivery and quality of the learning management system used (Quality Matters, 2014). For teaching to be effective all these elements must be considered, thus best practices in online teaching cannot be examined in isolation from these factors (Boettcher, 2011).

Student classification of “best online faculty” has always been based on the ability of the faculty member to establish an online presence many times a week in the course (Boettcher & Conrad, 2010). So it is important that from the very beginning of the course the instructor should set a schedule about what times he/she will be available each week. Holding regular virtual office hours to address student concerns either by email, text, or phone is a great strategy (Boettcher, 2011). In many online courses, students are required to post a brief biography and comment on the posts of their classmates during the first week of class. The instructor also recognizes each student in the course by responding to their posts individually and welcoming them. This early interaction and presence by the instructor resolves many of the alienation fears which online students have and may often be expressed by questions such as, “is there anybody there?” (Hanover Research Council, 2009).

Providing an open and supportive online course community is vital. This guideline requires that there must be clearly written structures in the course which address interactions between faculty-to-student, student-to-student, and student-to-course resources (Roper, 2007). For some courses, the instructor provides videos or podcast lectures, weekly reminders, announcements, and feedback associated with grading. Students then are expected to read or watch the materials and then answer questions, work in small groups and respond to other students. The presence of the instructor in providing effective feedback can be done by posting daily in the discussion forums, making general observations about student discussions, and leading students who may have veered off track (Roper, 2007; Boettcher & Conrad, 2010). The resources provided in each course are varied. But this criterion is aimed at instructional materials which provide the course content in varied formats to address the different learning styles of each student (Boettcher, 2011; Hanover Research Council, 2009).

Time management is an essential skill for everyone in the online community (Roper, 2007). Are the expectations of what should be completed each day or each week clearly spelled out for students? This must be seen from the perspective of a student who is new in the online environment. Besides providing a checklist, a rubric on how each assignment will be graded is important. Do students have information about what it will take to be successful in the course? The instructor must provide clear expectation of the response time to students. If there is any change in this time schedule, that should be communicated to the students. When students understand that their instructor is always present, has clearly set expectations and provides effective feedback, they work to meet these expectations and do not want to disappoint their instructor.

Inviting feedback from students about their impressions of the course should be done about three weeks into the semester (Boettcher & Conrad, 2010). Although course evaluations are usually completed after the semester, such early reflection may help the instructor to make certain changes in critical time when students can benefit. This modification of the course midstream also demonstrates to the learners that the instructor is genuinely concerned about their success. This does not have to be a complex exercise. It could merely be two simple questions in a discussion forum asking students, “how is the course going for you so far” and “do you have any suggestions?”

The approaches used by faculty members teaching in the Online Adult Learner-Focused Program are

supported by sound pedagogy. Generally, it is likely that every recommended best practice may not be applicable to all disciplines but the intent behind the method could definitely be followed to improve efficiency. For example, if posting to the discussion board every day is not a practical option, you could engage students by other means, thereby maintaining regular online presence. Effectively blending standardized course design utilizing tools such as the Quality Matters Rubric (2014) and applying adult learner focused instructional strategies enables instructors to offer a rich and effective instructional platform for adult learners unfamiliar with the online landscape.

Program Profile

The Online Adult Learner-Focused Program has been a work in progress. It evolved from the need to address the unique requirements of adult learners who could benefit from taking some of their courses online and decrease the amount of time needed to be on campus. Further, online course planning, design and delivery were areas that needed to be addressed and met with evidence-based practices designed to improve teaching effectiveness and student learning outcomes. Forty (40) percent of the college's student population are adult learners. The college holds membership in the Adult Learning Consortium (ALC) and benefitted from a grant to develop and improve online courses. The Program started in the spring 2013 academic term with faculty members who were selected to teach the online adult learner-focused courses. They participated in a series of workshops that included special training that focused on adult learning strategies and online course development.

The college joined the University System of Georgia's Adult Learning Consortium (USG ALC) which provided funding to 13 institutions belonging to the governing system. The goal of the Consortium was to develop processes and policies to increase access and facilitate the retention, progression, and graduation of adult learners. In addition to establishing prior learning assessment policies, multiple start times, online programs, and a webpage to promote and announce the program, a suite of adult learner focused courses within the core were developed at the institution. The identified courses consisted of 10 core courses that had high online enrollment and were required for degree completion. The courses were piloted in the spring 2014 academic term. These courses infused adult learner centered learning strategies particularly effective in online instruction.

Methodology

This section presents the methods and procedures that were used to conduct this study. The following topics will be discussed: research design, description of the setting, sample and population, a brief profile of the program, instrumentation, and the treatment of data.

This section presents the methods and procedures that were used to conduct this study. The following topics will be discussed: research design, description of the setting, sample and population, a brief profile of the program, instrumentation, and the treatment of data.

Research Design

The research design is exploratory. A research questionnaire technique for collecting data was utilized. It consisted of two sections that sought information regarding student's level of satisfaction with key areas of the course and to determine the degree to which the goals of the program were being met.

Sample and Population

This study collected data from adult learners enrolled in online courses at a small public college in the southeast area of the United States. Ninety-seven respondents, collectively, from eight different courses were selected utilizing non-probability, purposive and convenience sampling. Names or any other potentially identifying characteristics of the participants were asked not to be included on the questionnaire. All results are based on group analysis. All subjects were adults and voluntarily completed

the questionnaire.

Instrumentation

The instrument for collecting data, a 10 item, non-standardized questionnaire, was developed by the authors. A four-level Likert-type scale questionnaire was utilized to determine the student's level of satisfaction. The scale ranges for levels of satisfaction for item 1, 2 and 3 were: 1-Very Satisfied, 2-Satisfied, 3-Neutral, and 4-Not Satisfied. Regarding recommending the course, the options were 'Yes' or 'No.'

The section that assessed the goals of the program also used a four-level Likert-type scale questionnaire. The scale ranges for goal 1 were: 1-Strongly Agree, 2-Agree, 3-Neutral, and 4-Disagree. Goal #2 scale ranges were: Always 2-Sometimes, 3-Once, and 4-Never. Goal #2 options consist of Always, Sometimes, Once and Never. The participants were asked to place an "X" next to the appropriate item.

In order to improve student course delivery strategies, five areas of inquiry were explored. They included the student's (1) interaction with the instructor, (2) interaction with course resources, (3) course workload, and (4) recommendation of the course to other students. Additionally, the Online Adult Learner-Focused Program goals included the following two objectives that were assessed via the student survey: improve online course design and delivery; and consciously build courses with adult learners in mind. The third objective of the Program, which was not surveyed in the present study, is to enable adult learners to take online courses and complete their education in a timely manner.

Treatment of Data

A non-probability, purposive and convenience sample was utilized. Non-probability sampling refers to case selection rather than random sampling. Convenience sampling refers to cases that are conveniently available. In purposive sampling, researchers purposively select those believed will give the best information as participants (Patten, 2002). It is purposive in that the authors sought students who are known to be adults in the online adult-focused classes. Further, it is a convenience sampling because the authors had knowledge of available students enrolled the online classes to participate in the study. The questionnaires were reviewed for completeness and legibility. Upon completion of collecting all usable data, the analysis and interpretation began. Frequency runs of all research variables was conducted to summarize the data.

Results

There were 97 respondents for this study. The findings are organized into two sections: student satisfaction, and program effectiveness. Table 1 provides the satisfaction levels of students enrolled in the classes.

TABLE 1: Student Satisfaction

	STUDENT SATISFACTION			
	Very Satisfied	Satisfied	Neutral	Not Satisfied
<u>Interaction with Instructor</u>	46%	29%	24%	4%
<u>Interaction with Peers</u>	34%	43%	16%	6%

-

<u>Course Workload</u>	More Than Other Courses	Same as Other Courses	No Comment
	41%	52%	7%

<u>Recommend Course to Other Students</u>	Yes	No
	92%	8%

When surveyed, regarding their interaction with the course instructor, 75 percent of the respondents were satisfied (46% - very satisfied and 29% - satisfied). Twenty-four (24) percent indicated neutral and 4 percent noted dissatisfaction. When gauging the course workload in comparison to other courses, 41 percent of the students indicated that it was more than other courses, while 52 percent noted that their experience was that same. Seven (7) percent of the respondents indicated “no comment.” A large majority of surveyed students indicated that they would recommend the course to other students (92%), while 8 percent would not. In sum, the overall results suggest that students experienced a high degree of satisfaction with the online adult learner-focused courses.

Table 2 provides the results of student’s response associated with the goals of the program. Two goals of the program were assessed.

Table 2: Program Goals

PROGRAM GOALS

	<u>Improve Online Course Design and Delivery</u>			
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
Course design helped me engage more fully with the course	45%	33%	16%	5%

	<u>Consciously Build Online Courses with Adult Learners in Mind</u>			
	Always	Sometimes	Once	Never
The instructor addressed my unique academic needs as an adult learner	60%	30%	4%	6%

The goal, “improve online course design and delivery,” was assessed using the survey prompt: the course

design helped me engage more fully with the course. Seventy-eight (78) percent indicated an agreement (45% - strongly agree, and 33% - agree). Sixteen (16) percent were neutral and 5 percent noting “disagreement.” The goal, “consciously build online course with adult learners in mind,” was assessed by the survey prompt: the instructor addressed my unique academic needs as an adult learner. Sixty (60) percent of the respondents indicated “always,” while 30% noted “sometimes.” Four (4) percent indicated once, and six percent noted “never.” In sum, the results of the two inquiry areas that focused on assessing the goals of the program were encouraging.

Limitations of the Study

There are three limitations of the study. The first limitation is the number of participants. Secondly, convenience sampling techniques may or may not represent the full satisfaction level of adult students in online classes. A larger population that is randomly selected could potentially provide a more diverse and inclusive data set. Since the responses are prearranged, the opportunity to probe for additional information is limited or not possible. These are self-reports; therefore, the risk that respondents may offer socially acceptable answers exist.

Discussion

This study has several implications for institutions endeavoring to develop or expand online programming that targets adult students with specified courses. The instructors, program coordinator and college administrators of this Program recognized that there is still much more work to do. One opportunity area that serves as a platform to maintain a forward momentum is strengthening faculty competencies in providing excellence in teaching adults enrolled in online courses. Further, the need to secure additional funding, external, as well as internal, must become a priority in order to support much of the training that will be acquired via outside educational vendors. Lastly, there is a need to preserve robust assessment mechanisms and protocols. Institutions must consistently and objectively assess their programs, students, curriculum and instructional modes in efforts to strengthen areas that show promise in providing effectiveness in online adult learner-focused courses.

There is also a need to explore strategies that best position institutions desiring to launch an online adult-learner focused program. This requires intentional planning and skilled execution. Student and institutional satisfaction surveys such as the ones developed by CAEL and Noel Levitz have immense utilitarian purposes in meeting this goal. Further, veteran online instructors, in addition to those aspiring to deliver instruction via distance education should be trained and fully equipped with requisite skill sets and a knowledge base that benefits themselves and the students in their courses. Quality Matters has long been recognized for its rigor and comprehensiveness of its course design in preparing instructors to deliver robust and student-centered online courses. These two resources are ideal points of entry.

Adult Learner Focused Institution (ALFI) Surveys

As members of the Adult Learning Consortium (ALC) of the University System of Georgia, the Program received funding to conduct an Adult Learner Focused Institution (ALFI) survey developed by CAEL targeted towards adults 25 years and older. CAEL’s *Principles of Effectiveness for Serving Adult Learners* (2000) is the basis for the Inventory. The ALFI Toolkit consists of two parts: The Adult Learner Inventory (ALI) and Institutional Self-Assessment Survey (ISAS). ALI is completed by adult learners and measures both satisfaction and levels of importance with a wide range of institutional policies, practices, and procedures. The ALI measures the institution’s strengths (high importance, high satisfaction) and challenges (high importance, low satisfaction) and helps institutions set priorities and strategically meet adult learners’ needs. ALI is paired with CAEL’s Institutional Self-Assessment Survey (ISAS) to help institutions gain a snapshot of faculty, staff, and adult learners’ perceptions of adult learner programs.

The Institutional Self-Assessment Survey (ISAS) is completed by a random selection of faculty and staff

across the institution, and evaluates a wide range of activities, policies, and practices at the institution. ALI contains 47 standard items rated for importance and satisfaction covering the following specific areas: Institutional Background, Mission and Organizational Structure, Recruitment and Orientation, Tuition and Financial Aid, Teaching and Learning, Faculty Recruitment and Development, Student Services, and Key constituencies. In addition, 10 institution specific questions are included in the survey where specific institutional needs or concerns can be addressed. The ALFI tools report provides benchmarking data to compare institutions with other colleges and universities serving adults nationwide.

The Survey used to inform the Online Adult Learner-Focused Program originally was conducted in 2009 and the same survey was administered again in 2014. Based on the high performance gap as well as feasibility, two areas were addressed: 1) Sufficient course offerings within my program are available each term (2.01). In 2010 online courses were introduced at the institution and the numbers almost doubled within two years with 80 classes offered online. In the spring 2012 academic term about 15% of courses were offered online and that rate continues to grow steadily at the institution. The second area of consideration is: This college offers strategies to help me cope with the multiple pressures of home, work, and my studies. Recognizing that 40% of the students are adult learners at the institution, a suite of 10 online courses in the core curriculum were developed with adult learner focus. While learning objectives, course resources, learning activities, and assessments were the same as other sections, these courses were developed to address the specific learning needs and styles of adult learners. Faculty were trained in adult learning strategies that evolved both from published research as well as discussions emerging from cross disciplinary exchange. The full potential of the Learning Management System (Brightspace) was utilized to introduce adult learners to online learning and engage them throughout the duration of the course.

The results of the same survey conducted at the college in 2014 indicated that students had identified two specific institutional strengths. First, Campus Item 22: I receive the help I need to develop my academic skills, including reading, writing, and math. Secondly, Question # 18: This College uses technology on a regular basis to communicate with me. This indicated that the Adult Learner Program addressed these two target areas that were identified by students as specific priorities.

Quality Matters

There is a persistent need to maintain a robust training and development agenda for online and adult-focused programs which helps to solidify the competencies of instructional designers, instructors and administrators. This is one of the "walk-away" messages of this Program. Quality Matters (QM) focuses on online course design standards, as well as a course review process that is peer based. Central to this process is the Quality Matters Rubric, which is a set of 40 specific standards. These standards, according to Quality Matters (2014), which are presented in groups of eights, address these key quality areas:

1. Course Overview and Introduction
2. Learning Objectives (Competencies)
3. Assessment and Measurement
4. Instructional Materials
5. Course Activities and Learner Interaction
6. Course Technology
7. Learner Support
8. Accessibility and Usability

The nationally recognized program with over 850 subscribed colleges and universities, certifies the quality of online courses and their components. In addition to institutions of higher education, they also work with K-12 schools. The primary components of the process include the QM Rubric, Peer Review Process and QM Professional Development. The Rubric serves as an evaluation tool which assesses the design for both totally online, as well as blended courses. The Peer Review Process is driven by trained QM Peer Reviewers who serve on a peer review team. The Program maintains a database of these individuals. The Professional Development component provides support to other QM programs (Quality Matters, 2014). As

with the growth and evolution of any program, there is a continuous need for evaluation. Regarding the QM Program, in particular the Rubric, Legon and Runyon (2007, p.4) noted that More work is needed to identify the relationship between the incorporation of particular rubric standards in a course and the resulting student performance, persistence and satisfaction with greater precision.

General Review Standard V of Quality Matters Rubric (2014) focuses on learner interaction and states that effectively designed instructor-student interaction, meaningful opportunities for peer interaction, and frequent student-content interaction is essential to keep students motivated and engaged in an online course. This standard is based on research findings that emphasize the importance of several types of learner interactions. For example, Muirhead (2000, p.4) proposed six types of interactive activities that foster learner-learner interaction: sharing of relevant personal experiences, reference to appropriate materials (besides assigned readings), comments on the opinions of others, introduction of new issues for discussion, questions posed to the group by students with instructor acting as a guide and facilitator.

Learner Support requires that courses offered online must provide students with access to support services that are necessary for their success. Almost all institutions provide some kind of services for students on campus to get the help they need. Online learners need access to such services as well. According to General Review Standard VII Quality Matters Rubric (2014), there are four main kinds of support services, namely: technical support, accessibility support, academic services support and student services support. Visser and Visser (2000) have noted the general absence of evidence from research regarding a correlation between effective student support services and online learning. It is also argued that by having an institutional presence online, the psychological distance between the learner, instructor, and instructional materials are reduced, and thereby reinforces connectedness which is an important predictor of student learning (Shin, 2001). Advising, for example, has been shown to help online students successfully complete their academic goals (Ludwig-Hardman & Dunlap, 2003; Feasley, 1983; Thompson, 1989).

Recommendations and Conclusions

This study has afforded the researchers an opportunity to evaluate a program though in its infancy, yet shows promise in addressing the needs of adult learners. Additional and varied assessments of student learning, instructor effectiveness, and the efficiency of the Online Adult Learner-Focused Program in meeting its goals must continue and undergo periodic evaluations. Based on the encouraging results, the following tri-leveled recommendations are offered.

Instructors

It is critical that instructors teaching online adult learner-focused courses prepare course content that follows a prescribed set of best practices. For example, ensuring that readings, assignments and assessments are aligned with the learning outcomes. This focuses the efforts of the students on what matters – achievement of the course learning objectives. Instructors should design projects for students that are iterative - where students will turn in and receive feedback on selected components of an assignment or project. This encourages the adult learner to foster an engagement with the instructor that is beneficial to the student. This creates the expectation in learners that their instructors are here to assist them in completing projects, not just facilitation of the course. Instructors should foster a learning environment that is flexible and encourages students to complete all assignments toward the end of the course and achieve all the stated learning objectives despite receiving fewer points for turning in late assignments. Inflexibility in completing assignments on time, or not at all, is a disincentive and creates anxiety in the adult-learner, but flexibility encourages learners to complete assignments and accept the feedback on late assignments and the respective lower point value.

Program Coordinators

The continued development of a cadre of instructors who are excited about preparing adult-learners should be the focus of program coordinators. Grooming instructors dedicated to the type of pedagogical

approaches discussed is paramount. Program coordinators need to plan training opportunities for instructors and emphasize the need to nurture learner-instructor interaction. This is another critical recommendation that will prepare online programs for success. Program Coordinators cannot afford to overlook opportunities to improve new or existing programs by conducting an internal and external environmental scan to determine strengths, weaknesses, threat, and opportunities. It is recommended that Program Coordinators and instructors continually assess the demands and needs of students to ensure online program viability, as well as aggressively seek external funding opportunities and advocate for internal resources to fully support the Program.

College Administrators

Investing in faculty development specifically geared towards creating and nurturing adult learner programs will not only benefit adult learners on campus but will also open the door to a healthy interchange of instructional strategies across disciplines and among faculty. Especially critical is the full use of all learning management tools that must be aligned with institutional culture and practice to ensure that course parameters are sufficiently broadened to draw in all adult learners. Sufficient attention must be paid to learner support services also, and investment in external tools like Smarthinking, are particularly helpful in offering online tutorial services to students. SmarterMeasure is another tool that assists students to determine their level of online readiness and adult learners can utilize institutional and free online resources to address and improve their specific areas of weakness. College administrators must commit to ensuring that resources, human and financial, are properly aligned to meet the growing needs of adult learners and continued success of the Program.

These recommendations are instructive for institutions endeavoring to launch an online adult learner-focused program. Further, they are useful in prescribing efficacy in teaching and learning separately for the adult learner, online instruction, programming, and distance education design and delivery. The recommendations are not presented as an exhaustive guide – individually, nor collectively – for instructors, program coordinators and college administrators. They are, however, a series of intentional strategies and considerations that will better position institutions for thoughtful and planned engagement of adult learners – a valued cohort – enrolled in online courses, which is a rapidly expanding instructional platform for post-secondary institutions.

References

- Allen, I. E., and Seaman, J. (2014). *Grade change: Tracking online education in the United States*. Babson Research Group. Retrieved from <http://www.onlinelearningsurvey.com/reports/gradechange.pdf>.
- Allen, I. E. and Seaman, J. (2013). *Changing course: Ten years of tracking online education in the United States*. Retrieved from <http://www.onlinelearningsurvey.com/reports/changingcourse.pdf>.
- Ambrose, S. A., Bridges, M. W., DiPetro, M., Lovett, M. C., and Norman, M. K. (2010). *How Learning Works: 7 Research-Based principles for Smart Teaching*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.
- Bates, T. (2011). *2@11 Outlook for Online Learning and Distance Education*. Retrieved from <http://provost.ncsu.edu/governance/task-forces/distance-education/2011/documents/2011-outlook-for-online-learning-and-de.pdf>.
- Boettcher, J. V. (2011). *Designing for Learning: Ten Best Practices for Teaching Online*. Retrieved from <http://www.designingforlearning.info/services/writing/ecoach/tenbest.html>.
- Boettcher, J. V. and Conrad, R. M. (2010). *The Online Teaching Survival Guide: Simple and Practical Pedagogical Tips* (1st ed.). San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

Boettcher, J. V. and Conrad, R. M. (2010). *E-Coaching Success Tips*. Retrieved from <http://www.designingforlearning.info/services/writing/ecoach/tenbest.html>

Boettcher, J. V. (2007). Ten Core Principles for Designing Effective Learning Environments: Insights from Brain Research and Pedagogical Theory. Retrieved from www.innovateonline.info/index.php?view=article&id=54.

Brown University School of Professional Studies (n.d.) Best Practices for Online Learning. Retrieved from <http://www.brown.edu/academics/professional/faculty/online/best-practices.php>.

Council of Adult and Experiential Learning. (2013). Competency-Based Education. 2013 CAEL Forum & News. Retrieved from http://www.cael.org/pdfs/cael_competency_based_education_2013

Caffarella, R. S and Barnett, B. G. (1994). Characteristics of adult learners and foundations of experiential learning. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 62, 29-42.

Hanover Research Council. (2009). Best Practices in Online Teaching Strategies. Retrieved from <http://www.uwec.edu/AcadAff/resources/edtech/upload/Best-Practices-in-Online-Teaching-Strategies-Membership.pdf>.

Knowles, M. S. (1984). *Andragogy in Action. Applying modern principles of adult education*, San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

Knowles, M. (1990, 4ed.). *The Adult Learner. A neglected species* Retrieved from <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED084368.pdf>.

Knowles, M. S., Swanson, R. A., and Holton, E. F. III (2005). *The adult learner: The definitive classic in adult education and human resource development (6th ed.)*. California: Elsevier Science and Technology Books.

Koenig, R. J. (2010). A study in analyzing effectiveness of undergraduate course delivery: Classroom, online and video conference from a student and faculty perspective. *Contemporary Issues in Education Research*, 3(10), 13-25. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/808395531?accountid=8415>.

Kruger, T. (2001). A virtual revolution: Trends in the expansion of distance education. *United States Distance Learning Journal*, 15, 11.

Legon, R. and Runyon, J. (2007). Research on the impact of the quality matters course review. 23rd Annual Conference on Teaching and Learning. Retrieved from http://www.uwex.edu/disted/conference/Resource_library/proceedings/07_5284.pdf

Muirhead, B. (2000). Enhancing Social Interaction in Computer-Mediated Distance Education. *Educational Technology & Society*, 3, 4-11.

National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education. (2007). *The Condition of Education 2007*(NCES 2007-064), Indicator 10.

National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. (2012). Snapshot Report – Adult Learners. Retrieved from <http://nscresearchcenter.org/snapshotreport-adultlearners/>

Patten, M. L. (2002). *Understanding research methods: An overview of the essentials (3rd Ed.)*. Los Angeles: Pyczak.

Quality Matters Higher Education Rubric Workbook. (2014, 5th edition). Quality Matters.

Annapolis, MD: Author.

Quality Matters. (2014). Quality Matters Overview. Retrieved from https://www.qualitymatters.org/applying-rubric-15/download/QM_Overview_for%20Current%20Subscribers_AE2013.pdf.

Roper, A. R. (2007). How students develop online learning skills. *Educause Quarterly*, 1, 62-65.

Sener, J. and Shattuck, K. (2005). Research Literature and Standards Sets Support for Quality Matters Review Standards. *Quality Matters Online*. Retrieved from http://www.csmd.edu/dlf/pdf/Quality_Matters_lit_review_v9-29-05_fnl.pdf

Southern Regional Education Board (2015). Who is the adult learner? Retrieved from http://www.sreb.org/page/1397/who_is_the_adult_learner.html.

Wang, Q. (2006). Quality assurance - best practices for assessing online programs. *International Journal on ELearning*, 5, 2: 265-274.

Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration, Volume XVIII, Number 3, Fall 2015

University of West Georgia, Distance Education Center

[Back to the Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration Contents](#)