Chapter 16
Online Higher Education for Nontraditional Adult Students:
Best Cases of Public Universities

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines two U.S. four-year public universities, the Pennsylvania State University World Campus and the University of Oklahoma Outreach, that have successfully developed online adult education system/programs for adults. Using the principles of effectiveness for serving adult learners, the integrated review reveals not only how they advance online higher education environment for adults, but the types of challenges they have. Key findings highlight that, under a strong tradition of distance education, "self-assessment system," "financial independence," and "diverse active supports for life and career planning" play a critical role in increasing the academic engagement and retention of adult students. However, they also have several challenges: "high tuition rates and limited scholarship options," "monitoring students' experience," "learning outcome assessment," and "commitment of faculty members." The authors close with practical/academic implications and future research agendas.

INTRODUCTION

"Traditional" 18-22-year-old full-time students no longer dominate the higher education demographic. In fact, a more diverse student body participates in higher education today that includes more students over the age of 22, work full-time, have dependents, enrolled part-time, or some combination of these. The National Center for Education Statistics reports that the number of students who are over the age of 22 has grown about 20% during the past decade, and is projected to increase continuously in the future (as cited in Osam, Bergman, & Cumberland, 2011). Predictions show that by the year 2020, 65% of all jobs will require at least some college-level degree or equivalent, further attracting nontraditional students to enter higher education (Canevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2013).

For adult students who have already been steady in the workforce, online education opens the door for them to consider education, even as a first-time pursuit of higher education, because of the ease of accessibility. As many of them face challenges balancing between personal, work-related, and academic lives, they demonstrate a preference to pursue certificates/degrees through online programs, which adds flexibility for their study (Choy, 2002). According to the U.S. Department of Education report in 2015, during the 2011-2012 academic year, 6.5% of degree programs offered the option to complete the program entirely online. The report also shows that of students who chose to take their degree 100% online, 10.6% were single with at least one dependent, and 12.4% met at least four of the seven defining characteristics of a nontraditional student: "being independent for financial aid purposes, having one or more dependents, being a single caregiver, not having a traditional high school diploma, delaying postsecondary enrollment, attending school part time, and being employed full time" (as cited in U.S. Department of Education, 2015, p. 1).

Recognizing that adult learners have become an integral part of the changing student body, both for-profit and non-profit higher education institutions are expanding diverse and inclusive online educational programs. Providing high-quality education is crucial for all learners, including those who return to school to develop personal and professional expertise, and those who aim to change careers. Through the expansion of technology over the last decade, the number of students taking online courses has increased from 570,000 in 2003 to 6.7 million in 2013 (Allen & Seaman, 2013). However, low retention rates have become a growing concern for many of these programs (Bawa, 2016). Heyman (2010) claims, "one of the biggest concerns in online education emanates from the excessively high attrition rates in fully online programs compared with traditional classes" (as cited in Bawa, 2016, p. 1).

Existing research have offered some academic and practical suggestions to enhance retention rates and academic engagement of adults in higher education, and one of their suggestions was to provide online degree/certificate programs (Altbach, Reisberg, & Rumbley, 2009; Council for Adult and Experiential Learning [CAEL], 2005; Flint & Frey, 2003; Klein-Collins, Sherman, & Soares, 2010; Mancuso, 2001; Radford & Weko, 2011). However, most of these studies have primarily paid attention to for-profit colleges or adult-focused universities. Not many studies focus on non-profit, traditional four-year higher education institutions and their online education system/programs, although they have expanded online adult education programs under their traditional education systems in recent years. Therefore, this chapter examines the cases of two traditional universities that exemplify the strong online adult education programs among U.S. public universities and how they have successfully developed their online education system/programs.

This chapter starts with a review focusing on trends and issues of online higher education for adult students. Next, we examine the principles of effectiveness for serving adult learners, provided by the

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