Chapter 3

Improving U.S. College Graduation Rates with Quality Online and Blended Degree Completion Programs:
Lessons Learned

Lisa Braverman
Fairleigh Dickinson University, USA

ABSTRACT

The Lumina Foundation estimates the number of American adults possessing some college education, but no degree, to hover at about 47 million. CAEL approximates this number to be about 100 million when including adults without any previous college study. This chapter questions whether there are sufficient degree completion programs available in the U.S. to meet current demand. With the U.S. a dismal 19th in the 2015 OECD rankings of college graduation rates, this chapter makes the case that there is more work for American colleges and universities to do to address the gaping disparity between the number of Americans holding four-year degrees and those needed to provide the innovation required to maintain future American economic vitality. Finally, the chapter reviews the blended classroom approach as a highly effective model for serving the adult degree completion population and describes a successful program that was recently created at Long Island University.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter reviews the magnitude of the college degree completion challenge in the United States and pose questions about the long term costs of failing to provide sufficient opportunities for American adults to completing bachelor's degrees. It also discusses online education as one approach to solving this complex issue and the drivers and conditions responsible for its emergence and popularity among adult learners, including the growth of technology and the record numbers of adults returning to college

over the past thirty years. In addition, the chapter covers the appeal of online study to degree completers and identify the number of adult learners currently enrolled in online classes and also reviews online innovations such as blended and flipped classrooms as useful approaches in serving current and prospective adult degree completers. Finally, the chapter provides a case study describing a blended degree completion program that was created at Long Island University (LIU) in New York from 2011-2013 and draws conclusions that may help guide other institutions looking to advance degree completion programs for adults at their own institutions.

Specifically, the case study will include the following elements:

- **Institutional Context and Vision:** A description of the campus before the adult degree completion program was created and the emergent needs that were responsible for the program's genesis;
- **Market Analysis:** The research study that was conducted regarding the educational and economic landscape of Long Island, a large suburb of New York City;
- **Program Design:** A description of the new blended degree completion program initiative from outset to completion. and the conditions, figures and forces that advanced it;
- **Learners Served:** The diverse array of nontraditional students in the program and their individual stories, needs and life stages;
- **Innovative Program Features:** The elements and unique characteristics of the new degree completion program, such as: a) unconventional blended arrangements; b) frequent solicitation of student feedback; c) concierge customer service model; d) emphasis on convenience and flexibility; e) elements consistent with Adult Learning Focused Institutions (ALFI) practice and culture per the studies of the Council of Adult Experiential Learning (CAEL); f) inclusion within the program of business-related, quantitative and communication courses for their future value and applicability to the world of work;
- **Faculty Participation:** The faculty and academic department involvement, participation and professional growth that were responsible for creating a high quality program;
- **Program Outcomes:** The program launch and documented outcomes, including student success and satisfaction rates.

In summary, the chapter seeks to provide strong evidence to support the premise that there is an acute need for more abundant adult degree completion programs in the U.S. The LIU case study is presented to provide an example that might be adopted by other institutions as they participate in the national effort to address this critical issue in American education by increasing the number of convenient, quality degree completion programs for America's academically unprepared adults.

BACKGROUND: AN UNDEREDUCATED AMERICA

Issues, Controversies, Problems

What are the costs of being ranked the nineteenth most college-educated country in the civilized world? At present, the United States places a dismal nineteenth in college graduation rates in the 2015 Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) rankings of western, first-world nations (Weston, 2014). Aside from the negative public perception and embarrassment over having fallen from first place

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