Lifelong learning in the USA: A focus on innovation and efficiency for the 21st century learner

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Abstract

Today, the economy of the United States is requiring a more highly skilled and educated workforce. However, the need for greater levels of educational participation by adults already in the workforce comes at a time when states and the nation are severely challenged by budget deficits and are looking for ways to trim education costs, not enhance them.

Promising practices in lifelong learning will need to be replicated and brought to scale to meet ambitious degree completion goals in these challenging budgetary times. It will be important to enroll more people in education programs, credential learning that may have already occurred outside of the formal educational structure, and become more creative in the use of public funding for education. It will also be important to design programs to be more adult-friendly, in terms of scheduling and structure, but with programs to keep students engaged and committed to degree completion.

This article discusses how US educational institutions are using innovative principles and practices to meet current challenges and support lifelong learning. The innovative practices address six challenges: aspiration, access, academic and career pathways, transitions, affordability and success.

Keywords: Career pathways, Accelerated, Prior learning assessment, Competency, Advising

Introduction: Education and lifelong learning as pathways to success and prosperity in the United States

Education and lifelong learning have played a central and key role in the social, political and economic life of the United States (US). Throughout the history of the country, education has provided a path for citizens and immigrants alike to achieve the American dream of success and prosperity; and state and national policy makers have demonstrated innovative ways to provide access to growing numbers and diverse populations so that today access to basic and advanced education is nearly universal.
Today, as the US works to emerge from a severe economic downturn, it is also facing an economic future that will require a more highly skilled and educated workforce. Recent analysis by Georgetown University’s Center for Education and the Workforce (CEW) has shown that only 28 percent of jobs in 1973 required workers to have some college or above, and by 2007 that need had increased to 59 percent of jobs. CEW projects that jobs that demand some postsecondary education will increase to 62 percent of jobs by 2018 (Carnevale, Smith & Strohl, 2010).

The need for greater levels of participation by traditional students and adults already in the workforce in postsecondary educational activities comes at a time when states and the nation are severely challenged by budget deficits and are looking for ways to trim education related costs, not enhance them.

This article provides an overview of the postsecondary and adult education system in the US followed by a discussion of how US educational institutions are using innovative principles and practices to meet current challenges and support lifelong learning.

A primer on postsecondary and adult education in the United States

The US system of education has three levels of formal education—elementary, secondary, and postsecondary. Secondary (or high school) graduates who elect to continue their education have a range of postsecondary options:

- technical or vocational institutions which may offer certificates or degrees
- two-year community or junior colleges which offer both the first two years of a standard four-year college curriculum as well as terminal or transferable two-year associate’s degrees and/or terminal career and technical certificates and degrees
- four-year colleges or universities

The credit hour

The vast majority of postsecondary institutions offer degrees based upon the

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1 Data in this section are from the US Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics unless otherwise noted.
credit hour. Students who successfully complete college-level courses are awarded credit hours, and the typical 15 or 16-week college course is worth three to four credit hours. Students typically need to accumulate around 60 credit hours for an associate’s degree (two-year degree), and they need to accumulate twice that number for a bachelor’s degree. Individual institutions determine the exact number of credits required for a degree and in what subjects they need to be earned. The number of credits that a given course is “worth” has traditionally been based not on learning outcomes but on the faculty’s workload as well as the amount of time a student spends in the classroom (Shedd, Summer 2003).

Innovative principles shaping the system

In their 2004 overview of American higher education, Eckel and King (2004) suggested that while US higher education borrows its structure for undergraduate education from the British and for graduate education from the Germans, the character and distinguishing qualities of the American academy are tightly woven with social, political, and philosophical beliefs that shape the country—“its character is profoundly influenced by three major philosophical beliefs that shape American public life” (p. iii).

First, the Jeffersonian ideals of limited government and freedom of expression led states, religious communities and individuals, rather than the federal government, to establish and maintain a diverse range of institutions protected from high levels of governmental control. Second, the strong influence of capitalism and markets drove the belief that diversity and high quality were best achieved through competition among institutions rather than centralized planning and control over the numbers and kinds of institutions. The third major influence suggested by Eckel and King was that of equal opportunity and social mobility. During the 20th century, American higher education came to be seen as the gateway to a better life and therefore broad access to higher education was important in order to achieve national and individual goals.

These philosophical beliefs and principles have led to the diverse, highly accessible and highly valued system of higher education in the United States today. Multiple institutions of higher learning compete for student enrollment and represent diverse missions, size, price, and control. Students in the US have a great degree of choice in the kind of postsecondary institution they wish to attend from the highly selective and expensive private institutions to the uniquely American community college system providing students with open access (no admission requirements), low cost postsecondary education, and close proximity to their home community.
One of the negative aspects of this decentralized and diverse system, however, is that national systems of planning and centralized quality assurance are not compatible or easily accomplished. Individual states and regional accrediting bodies have those roles. Federal involvement has primarily focused on providing equal access and opportunity for all who are qualified to benefit from postsecondary learning, and it does so through federal financial aid programs that provide grants and loans to students who qualify based on financial need.

Funding for lifelong learning in the United States

Postsecondary education in the US is not provided for free. The cost of a postsecondary education depends upon the type of institution as well as the type of degree. The College Board (2010a) reports that in 2010–2011, average annual tuition and fees were:

- $7,605 at public four-year institutions
- $2,713 at public two-year institutions
- $27,293 at private nonprofit four-year colleges and universities
- $13,935 at private for-profit institutions

Grants, loans and tax credits

While the cost of a college degree is high and ever rising, there are many federal, state and institutional programs providing grants and loans to various student populations. The College Board reports that in 2010–2011, full-time students received an average of about $6,100 in grant aid from various sources at public four-year institutions, $16,000 at private nonprofit institutions, and $3,400 at public two-year colleges (2010b). The federal government also provides tax credits to qualified families with educational expenses.

Employer educational assistance

Given the high financial barrier to postsecondary education in the US, many employers offer educational assistance to their workers as an employment benefit, which can offer a tax exempt source of tuition dollars up to $5,250 per year. It

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2 These costs do not include the cost of books, housing, food and other living expenses.
is unknown how many employers offer this benefit, and it is also unknown how many workers have access to it. However, a study of student data shows that approximately 913,100 part-time students received these benefits in 2007 (Jones, 2010).

The system for job training and lifelong learning

For adults who are pursuing other kinds of learning activities, the main funding source at the federal level is the Workforce Investment Act (WIA). There are two titles of WIA relating to funding for job training and lifelong learning:

- **Title I** provides funding for workforce development, addressing the employment and training needs of adults, dislocated workers and youth. The services are accessed through a nationwide network of one-stop centers administered by state and local Workforce Investment Boards. More than 8 million individuals received WIA-funded services in the twelve month period ending June 30, 2010. Funding for Title I programs totaled almost $3 billion in Fiscal Year 2010 (National Skills Coalition, 2011).

- **Title II** provides funding to the states for adult literacy programs. States are required to match these funds, and in the past many states have provided more funding than the required match in order to meet needs. The funding ultimately supports the basic adult education programs of local educational agencies, community-based organizations, volunteer literacy organizations, institutions of higher education, libraries, public housing authorities, and correctional institutions. Federal funding for Title II was $628.2 million in Fiscal Year 2010 for state formula grants (National Skills Coalition, 2011).

Innovative practices

For many years, public agencies, higher education institutions and other organizations have been working to get more adults interested in returning to school, help connect them with the most appropriate learning opportunities, and help them meet their educational goals. These approaches are often true innovations in that they have helped to redefine what lifelong learning means for adults and institutions alike. Thanks to these innovations, adults have better ways to access the basic skill training they need to qualify for higher learning, and adults have more options for earning degrees and other credentials, even if they hold full-time jobs.

The innovations fall into six broad categories: aspiration, access, academic and career pathways, transitions, affordability, and success.
Aspiration

In recent years there have been great efforts to get more adults interested in going back to school to improve their skills and gain more knowledge. This has been a particular focus of public officials who are interested in improving the skills of the workplace so that a region, a state or the country as a whole can position itself better in the global marketplace.

State governments focused with some intensity on this issue, in large part because states interested in attracting employers from high-wage, high-growth industries need to have the draw of an educated workforce.

Kentucky is one such state that was interested in attracting employers to the state from high-growth industries, particularly as so many manufacturers in that state were shutting their doors because of an overall decline in the industry or because of off-shoring. Kentucky launched an initiative called GoHigher that used traditional marketing and advertising strategies to encourage adults to return to school at all levels in order to complete a GED, certificate, or college degree. Other states have implemented similar programs, most notably Oklahoma with its Reach Higher program.

When President Barack Obama came into office in 2009, he made educating the workforce a top priority of his administration, saying in his very first address to Congress, “I ask every American to commit to at least one year or more of higher education or career training. [...] every American will need to get more than a high school diploma.” He also set a goal to have the US once again have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world by 2020 (Obama, February 24, 2009). In his recent State of the Union address, President Obama restated this goal and underscored its importance as the US strives to become a country able to compete and innovate (Obama, January 25, 2011).

States and the Obama administration are working to improve the aspiration of adults by shining a public spotlight on the importance of education. Regions and cities are also involved, as evidenced by programs such as Graduate!Philadelphia, a partnership of the public sector, a non-profit organization, and 18 colleges in and around Philadelphia. The program, which was established in 2005, was designed to increase the number of adults with college degrees in the Philadelphia region (Brenneman et al., 2010). One of its main activities is to reach out to adults who already have already completed one year of college, provide them with advising and support so that they become a “Comebacker” (Graduate!Philadelphia, 2005).
Access

Colleges and universities with missions to serve adult learners have long known that traditional course scheduling — during weekday mornings and afternoons — makes it impossible for many adults to go back to school. To improve access to lifelong learners, especially learners who work, these institutions began to offer evening and weekend courses, as well as distance learning, which allowed adults to take courses and even earn entire degrees without having to take time off of work. Innovations that are less commonly practiced include training held at the workplace, accelerated programs, modularized courses, open-entry/open-exit courses, and online or blended learning programs.

Onsite training

Even when training is offered at a convenient time, sometimes the location of the training can create barriers if transportation is an issue or if the travel time to and from training is more than people can add to already busy schedules. To remove this barrier, some training programs are located at the worksite, if there are enough trainees to make that offering worthwhile to the training provider. Common onsite programs include GED (“general education development” high school equivalency diploma) and English as a Second Language (ESL) programs as well as customized job training programs and apprenticeship programs (Choitz & Prince, 2008).

Accelerated Programs

Even when the time and location barriers can be solved through scheduling, often the time commitment of traditional degree programs can still present an obstacle for people who work full time.

In accelerated learning programs — which can include programs for certificates and degrees — course material is presented so that it takes less time than in conventional courses. For example, the course may have only twenty hours of class time as opposed to forty-five hours. A course may also be presented in a condensed period of time, such as a 16-week course presented in a five-week period. Some institutions are also beginning to offer bachelor’s degree programs that can be completed in three years rather than four. Some may accomplish this by using accelerated course formats and year-round attendance, while others redesign the curriculum content and structure to achieve the time savings (Brenneman et al., 2010).
**Modularized courses**

Some schools solve the time barrier in yet another way, by breaking up a course into its individual components. Oregon State University (www.oregonstate.edu) and the Kentucky Community and Technical College System (www.kctcs.edu) are two examples of institutions offering some of their courses in a modularized format, in which a three-credit course can be taken in three one-credit modules. This format provides the option of a shorter time period for taking a course, but at the pace of a regular course. As noted in Choitz and Prince (2008), offering modules can be a way to provide academically at-risk students a manageable amount of course work with the scheduling flexibility they may also need.

**Open-entry/Open-exit courses**

Accelerated and modular courses can also be offered in open-entry/open-exit format, meaning that students can have some flexibility in the start and end dates of the courses. Mott Community College’s website, for example, notes that its open-entry/open-exit courses, combined with modular and online formats, are designed to help workers and employers select the exact training they need when they need it. At Mott, there are no regularly scheduled courses, students work at their own pace, and students complete the course when they can demonstrate on exams that they have mastered the content (www.ooeo.mcc.edu). This format can allow for very targeted learning for working adults, but it could also be beneficial to students who have not taken a class in a long time (Choitz & Prince, 2008) or whose schedules require a more self-paced option.

**Online learning, blended learning, and open source curriculum**

The explosion of online learning opportunities has been a great way to expand access to adults working full time. Students with busy work and family schedules can pursue a wide variety of learning opportunities through online offerings, or also through blended formats in which part of the course is offered in a classroom or lab, and the rest is available online. This has also made it possible for students to reach beyond their geographical area in new ways.

Online is pushing even further into innovative territory through the availability of open source curriculum. Several sources of free instruction are available to the general public through open courseware sites such as Carnegie Mellon University’s Open Learning Initiative, Washington State Community College’s Open Course Library, MIT’s OpenCourseWare, the fee-based Epsilen offered by The New York Times, and other for-profit vendors (Klein-Collins, Sherman, & Soares, 2010).

These online learning options are becoming more sophisticated by offering
instruction that responds to individual learner needs. For example, Carnegie Mellon’s Open Learning Initiative (http://oli.web.cmu.edu/openlearning/) is designing web-based instruction with individual assessments embedded into every instructional activity. This approach is used to create feedback loops for evaluation and continuous improvement.

Research has found that in the case of an introductory level statistics course, combining open-learning software with two weekly 50-minute class sessions allowed students to master the material in half the time (Kolowich, 2009).

Academic and career pathways

The heightened awareness of the importance of skill building and education for a competitive workforce does not necessarily mean that every single US citizen can or should earn a four-year college degree. Not every job requires a bachelor’s degree, and not every individual is a good candidate for one. However, more and more jobs today are requiring some postsecondary education, particularly those jobs with potential for advancement to higher-level, higher-paying positions.

This new reality has inspired colleges and universities to design programs that help adults of all skill levels access postsecondary learning, whether the goal be a four-year degree, a one-year certificate, better wages, or long-term employability. In some cases, this has meant designing learning programs along a progression, where each new step in that progression builds on the step before it. Two examples of this kind of progressive academic programming for lifelong learners are bridge programs, and career ladder programs.

Bridge programs

Although it is clear to many low-skilled workers that the way to get ahead is to get additional education and credentials, many of the learning opportunities that hold hope for “getting ahead” have entrance requirements that can present a real barrier. Individuals who have low basic skills (below ninth grade [Form 3], typically), who do not have a high school diploma or GED, or who do not speak English well, may find themselves unable to enroll in training programs that have minimum basic skill requirements.

Ten years ago, the common “solution” was to have those individuals sit in basic skill courses to earn their GED or learn English, often for months or years of slow-going progress. An oft-heard complaint is the students can languish in these programs without ever achieving a credential or moving on to formal job training or academic degree program.
Today, however, bridge programs are serving as a better alternative. These programs can be vocationally-focused, combining basic skills content with workforce readiness, support services, and the knowledge and skills needed for a specific occupation (or cluster of occupations) (Strawn, 2010). The programs focus on basic skill and language deficiencies but do so in a contextualized way, such as using the vocabulary common to a specific occupational focus. Basic skills instructors coordinate instruction with technical education faculty, and the goal of the program is to prepare the students for entry to an education and training program that prepares the student for a higher-paying job (Strawn, 2010). The program often held up as an example of how to do this well is the Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training (I-BEST) in Washington State, which pairs an adult basic education instructor (and/or ESL instructor) with a technical instructor. Students work on improving their basic skills while also gaining postsecondary-level technical training and a pathway to further study in postsecondary programs. A report by the Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges found that I-BEST students were more likely than others to continue their education at the college level, earn college credits that lead to a credential, earn occupational certifications, and improve their basic skills (cited in Brenneman et al., 2010).

Bridge programs can also be designed to prepare students for higher education. Such programs help students whose previous academic history did not adequately prepare them for college-level study. A bridge program can offer coursework to bring the students up to a higher level of readiness through math, science, English language and writing courses. The College Readiness Program at the University of Rhode Island, for example, provides these courses free of charge in the evenings and on weekends, along with support services such as academic counseling, advising, tutoring, mid-semester academic evaluation, financial aid, and help completing college admission applications (Brenneman et al., 2010).

**Career pathways programs**

Creating pathways for adults to progress from one level of learning to another is also the approach of what have come to be called career pathways programs. Traditionally, if a student wanted to earn a credential that would lead to higher levels of employment, options were mostly limited to professional or occupational degree programs requiring multi-year time commitments. In contrast, the career pathway approach establishes a series of education and training programs that build upon one another, where each step in learning is designed to prepare the student for the next level of employment or education. These programs are often designed specifically for students who are working full time so that they can advance in their careers through education — but in a way that is less daunting, and that offers more frequent rewards compared to a two- or four-year program.
In some cases, lower levels of the career pathway program may incorporate bridge program models, in which basic skills and occupational skills are integrated to allow for even lower-skilled adults to access the career pathway. According to research conducted by the Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP), at least seven states (Arkansas, Illinois, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Ohio, Oregon, and Wisconsin) have been exploring how to provide statewide models for career pathways, and several others are working to develop bridge programs that would be connected to career pathways programs (CLASP, 2010).

Transitions

More and more, college students are attending more than one college in their quest to earn degrees. The most recent study of student mobility found that almost 65 percent of students attended more than one institution, and 26 percent attended more than two (Adelman, 2006). Now, with the availability of web-based courses and ready information about courses available from different institutions, those numbers may well be much higher.

With this degree of student mobility, the challenge then becomes how those students finally earn a degree when many of their college credits are from different institutions. Typically each institution has its own distinct policies regarding which transfer credits, and how many, can count toward a degree. Innovative solutions to this problem include statewide articulation and transfer policies, awarding credit for prior learning, degree completion institutions, credit transfer support services, and competency-based programs.

Statewide articulation and transfer policies

One set of solutions to help mobile students make use of learning they acquired from other institutions is the establishment of articulation and transfer policies. These are formal policies between two or more educational institutions specifying how credits earned at one institution will be accepted by another toward its degree programs. For example, over the past several decades, many community colleges have established articulation agreements with nearby four-year institutions so that students can easily transfer from the two-year to the four-year program. Some of these articulation agreements are so well-defined, and the transfer process has been made so easy for the student, that the community colleges act as feeder schools for the four-year institutions.

Many states are not only encouraging more of these kinds of articulation
agreements, they are also working to design and expand *statewide* articulation and transfer policies. For example, the state of Florida has one of the most comprehensive sets of articulation and transfer policies, with key components including a statewide course numbering system, common core general education requirements, and common prerequisites for bachelor’s degree programs (Florida Department of Education, 2011).

**Awarding credit for other learning (Prior learning assessment)**

Removing barriers to credit transfer is a great benefit to lifelong learners, but even more is needed for students who have acquired learning from non-credit programs, corporate or military training, workplace-based learning, volunteer activities, and other college-level learning that can and does take place outside of a credit-based course.

Prior learning assessments (PLA) measure what a student has learned outside of the college classroom. Institutions can determine what the student knows through a variety of different assessment methods, and then evaluate whether that learning is college level and how many college credits are equivalent to that learning. For more than 30 years, the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning has promoted a set of ten voluntary quality standards to ensure that PLA programs are consistent with academic integrity: the first and most important of these standards is that “Credit or its equivalent should be awarded only for learning, and not for experience” (Fiddler, Marienau, & Whitaker, 2006).

PLA includes methods such as:

- **Individualized student portfolios.** The student typically takes a specifically designed portfolio development course that helps them identify their learning from a variety of experiences, prepares portfolios equating prior learning to college courses, develops educational plans, and integrates prior and new learning to achieve academic goals. Finally, faculty with appropriate subject matter expertise evaluate the student’s portfolio.

- **Evaluation of corporate and military training for college credit.** The American Council on Education (ACE) often conducts these evaluations for a fee. ACE publishes credit recommendations for formal instructional programs non-collegiate agencies offer (particularly military training) in its ACE Guides. Many employers also work directly with local postsecondary institutions to evaluate the company’s training for college credit. By awarding credit to workers who have completed such training the institutions can use PLA as a recruitment tool.
• **Program evaluations of non-credit instruction** that award credit for those who achieve recognized proficiencies or equate that learning with specific for-credit courses at an institution. Community colleges, for example, offer many non-credit training programs with content that may be comparable to some college level courses. Some states are working to identify the credit equivalences of these programs so that the students earn some college credit toward a degree (Van Noy et al., 2008; Voorhees & Milam, 2005).

• **Customized exams**, also called “challenge exams”, some colleges offer to verify learning. These may be current course final exams or other tests developed at the department level for assessing general disciplinary knowledge and skill.

• **Standardized exams** such as:
  - Advanced Placement Examination Program (AP exams)
  - College Level Examination Program Exams (CLEP exams)
  - Excelsior College Exams
  - The DANTES Subject Standardized Tests, or DSST Exams

  Students who earn credits through PLA often save time by not having to take courses in subjects they have already mastered. Additionally, PLA assessments are typically carried out at a lower cost compared to tuition charged by the credit hour. Further, a recent Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) study found that PLA may serve as a motivator to adult learners: in examining the academic records of more than 62,000 students from 48 institutions, CAEL found that more than half (56 percent) of adult PLA students earned a postsecondary degree within seven years, while only 21 percent of non-PLA students did so (Klein-Collins, 2010).

  The challenge for students, however, is that PLA is not universally available, such credits are often accepted in limited ways, and the PLA credits are not often accepted in transfer. Most institutions offer some form of prior learning assessment for college credit—if only acceptance of advanced placement or AP credit—but considerable variation exists in terms of which assessment methods are available, how many PLA credits may apply toward a degree, which degree programs will accept those credits, and whether students even receive information from the institutions about PLA options. And PLA credits earned at one institution are sometimes not transferrable to another institution.

  Some states have taken steps to promote greater and more consistent use of PLA statewide. The Minnesota State Colleges and Universities system, for example, encourages PLA across all institutions. Vermont State Colleges has taken a different approach by offering PLA in a coordinated way among a group of institutions.
These system-wide approaches to PLA are noteworthy in that they formally recognize PLA’s value and encourage its use within institutions.

In addition, a partnership of CAEL, the American Council on Education (ACE) and the College Board has recently developed an online PLA service called LearningCounts.org. CAEL offers portfolio courses and faculty evaluations of student portfolios through LearningCounts.org, referring students to the College Board for standardized exam services and to ACE to determine whether ACE has evaluated the student’s military or corporate training for college credit. ACE will put all PLA credits earned through LearningCounts on transcripts and send the transcripts to the students’ choice of postsecondary institutions. LearningCounts.org is an innovation that has been designed to expand the availability of PLA, particularly for students attending institutions lacking the capacity to provide PLA in-house but also for the wider population of those with some college credits but no degree.

Degree completion institutions

Another strategy for recognizing learning that takes place in multiple locations and formats is the degree completion institution. At degree completion institutions, students can transfer in credits earned from a variety of sources — accredited institutions from different states, prior learning assessment credit (see above), online learning programs, and so on. The college evaluates the student’s credits and advises the student on missing coursework they still need to complete to earn a degree. Three of the best-known examples are Thomas Edison State College in New Jersey, Excelsior College in New York, and Charter Oak State College in Connecticut (Klein-Collins, Sherman, & Soares, 2010).

Credit transfer support services

Another solution for students with credits from multiple sources may be through an independent intermediary. Organizations like Academy One, for example, offer information on institutional credit transfer policies for national student audiences. They also provide students a “passport” in the form of a web-based platform where they can consolidate their academic history into a single location. Academy One then provides students with information on how the student’s passport maps to course offerings of institutions the student may be considering. As of 2010, over 12,000 students had used the passport system (Klein-Collins, Sherman, & Soares, 2010).
Competency-based programs

One additional approach to the student mobility challenge involves institutions designing degree programs around student learning outcomes, or competencies, rather than college credits. The institutions grant degrees based on what students have demonstrated that they know and can do. If students have taken courses at other institutions, their learning can be assessed by exams or other methods to determine the level of student achievement. At this time, however, only a small number of US institutions offer competency-based programs.

Affordability

The cost of postsecondary education in the US is a significant barrier for many adults who would like to earn a degree or certificate. The out-of-pocket costs often exceed available grant aid, causing many students to take on debt in order to go to school. The College Board recently reported that the median debt of bachelor's degree earners from families earning less than $30,000 per year in 2007–2008 was $16,500 for those attending public institutions, $21,000 for those attending private institutions, and $30,500 for those attending for-profit institutions (2010b).

This financial barrier to education is not likely to disappear anytime soon. In the current economic recession, most states are struggling to address declining revenues, and many are making significant cuts to higher education, even as they continue to put pressure on colleges and universities to improve student degree completion rates. Some states and institutions are thinking about how to be more creative with available funding in order to achieve more with less; for example, by tying funding for education to student performance rather than to student enrollment. In addition to these innovations in public funding policies, there have also been experiments designed to leverage private investment in adult learning.

Outcomes-based institutional funding

Public institutions have traditionally received state funding amounts that have largely been determined by the size of student enrollments. As states began to pay more attention to the question of student outcomes, particularly degree completion, many questioned this model. If higher education funding is an investment in a state's future workforce, what kind of return should the state be getting on that investment, if not significant numbers of citizens with college degrees?
The state of Tennessee, for example, has established an outcomes-based funding formula that bases all funding for education on outcomes “including but not limited to degree production, research funding and graduation rates at universities, and student remediation, job placements, student transfer and associates degrees at community colleges” (Tennessee Higher Education Commission, 2011). The specific outcomes are weighted differently for individual institutions based on the specific mission and type of institution.

Financial incentives tied to individual student progress

In addition to the larger funding streams that support institutions, we may see more examples of individual student financial aid that are structured in a way to be incentives to academic progress and success. The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education and The National Center for Higher Education Management Systems recently proposed several ways to structure these incentives. One approach is for state loan programs to avoid making loans until students are in the last half of their degree program to reduce the problem of students taking on debt without earning a credential, while another is for state financial assistance to be increased for students who earn an associate’s degree before transferring to a four-year institution (Brenneman et al., 2010). These kinds of incentives have proven successful when piloted. For example, a state program in Louisiana has experimented with offering monetary incentives if students stay enrolled at least half-time and maintain good grades; students in the program had better credit accumulation, and in self-reports the students said that they were more engaged in working toward their personal goals (Brenneman et al., 2010).

Structures to encourage private investment from employers and individuals

It is very clear to the federal government and state governments that public resources to fund higher education and lifelong learning are not likely to increase, even with the imperative to increase educational attainment of adults. That essentially means that more private funding sources may need to be tapped for lifelong learning. Governments have long used personal income tax incentives to encourage private savings for college tuition, and as mentioned earlier, many employers have policies of providing educational assistance to their workers, either as a benefit of employment or as a way for the employer to grow the skills of its workers. Almost one million part-time students used this benefit in 2007 (Jones, 2010).

Since 2000, CAEL has been piloting and advocating a new mechanism through which the state or federal government can leverage both personal and employer funding for education. Lifelong Learning Accounts (LiLAs) are employer-matched,
portable accounts that workers use to finance their education and training. LiLAs allow for co-investment in worker education and training by the workers themselves, their employers, and even third parties. For example, a third party contribution could be tax credits for employee and employer account contributions or special matching funds for lower-income or other target populations.

CAEL completed a successful five-year, three-site, multi-sector LiLA demonstration in Chicago, Northeast Indiana and San Francisco in 2008. LiLA program initiatives have or are currently taking place in Illinois (healthcare), Kansas City, Maine, New York City, San Francisco (mature workers), and Washington. Federal and state legislators have shown interest in the LiLA concept and have introduced several LiLA bills since 2007.

Success

For the past two years, there has been a strong emphasis on strategies to improve student success, including initiatives that help more adults stay engaged in learning, finish degree programs, and reduce the time they need to earn a postsecondary degree or credential. Many of the strategies proposed to help with student success include the innovations presented earlier in this article, and these strategies are helping many states develop comprehensive approaches to improving student success. In addition, some success-oriented innovations emphasize the importance of engaging and supporting students. These include learning communities and intensive individual student support (what one institution calls “intrusive advising,” as described below). Another innovation is to simplify the degree program dramatically so that students have a clear, pre-defined path to completion.

Comprehensive state models

A new nonprofit organization, Complete College America, is working with states to increase the number of Americans with a college degree or other credential, paying particular attention to the educational attainment of traditionally underserved populations. According to the organization’s website, 26 states have joined the Complete College America Alliance of States, in which the states pledge to make college completion a top priority and commit to taking specific actions (Complete College America, 2011).

The action plan recommended by Complete College America includes setting specific completion goals and tracking state and institutional progress, while also recommending policies and initiatives similar to those mentioned earlier in this article, such as shifting institutions to performance-based funding, establishing clear
and effective credit transfer policies, offering prior learning assessment, integrating online learning opportunities, offering accelerated programs, and linking financial aid to successful progression toward a certificate or degree (Complete College America, 2011).

Learning communities/Cohort groups

Many professional degree programs are designed so that students complete courses with a cohort group, so that the same group of students progresses from course to course together. Adult learning research (as summarized in Imel, 2002) has concluded that cohort members experience many benefits from learning as part of a cohort:

- They have positive feelings about their learning experiences
- They report increased critical thinking skills
- They are motivated to learn more
- They have seen a change in their perspective of their own and others’ learning

In addition, cohort members often provide each other with emotional and psychological support (Kegan et al., 2001).

Based on these benefits of cohort groups, such models are now being adopted by other degree and certificate programs as a strategy for improving student success (Brenneman et al., 2010).

“Intrusive” advising

Some institutions have experimented with a case management approach to advising that gives individual attention to students to make sure that they stay engaged and successful. Lone Star College – Montgomery in Conroe, Texas is one example, calling their program “intrusive” advising. In this model, each college advisor carried a caseload of about 300 students. The advisors visit some of the classes that the students attend, meet individually with the students twice a semester, help the students develop academic plans, and work with the students to identify and overcome barriers (“Case Management Advising Model”, 2009).

The approach showed real promise for achieving better student success for underserved populations. The college found that black students receiving this intervention had a retention rate of 92%, compared with only 73% of all black
students at the college. Similarly, Hispanic students receiving the intervention had a retention rate of 94% compared to 75% of the overall retention rate of Hispanic students (Lone Star College System, 2010).

**Limiting individual student choices**

An important lesson from behavioral economics research is that sometimes providing too many choices is not good for the consumer. Shoppers, for example, find it easier to choose a jar of jelly when there are three choices but when there are too many options, consumers can feel so overwhelmed that they will not be able to make a decision at all.

If we were to assume that this lesson applies to education as well, the Tennessee Technology Centers have developed job training and degree programs that are ideal for producing students who are able to progress and succeed without becoming overwhelmed by the options that face them. The Tennessee Technology Centers offer technical training as well as certificate and diploma programs in more than 50 occupational fields. One of the core components of the centers’ model is that students can choose the program, and then they choose whether to attend full time or part time. Once those decisions are made, there are no more decisions about what course to take or when to take it. In a case study on their model, TTC leadership noted that, “This absence of choice in the Center students’ program structure has major implications for the student experience; the first being elimination of confusion around what classes to take and in what sequence; second, there is very little choice in scheduling; and third, almost by default, the focus is on learning and completion” (“A working model of student success”, n.d.). The TTC pairs this approach with competency-based programs and case management to provide student support.

The centers believe that this model contributes to their great outcomes. Over a five year period, they found that completion in the Centers ranged from 62% to 94% (depending on the center), while completion rates for the community colleges in the state were between 6% and 13% (“A working model for student success,” n.d).

**Summary and conclusion**

Colleges, universities and other educational providers have recognized the growing need to serve adult learners better, and this new attention has resulted in a great number of innovations to improve adult interest in learning and degree completion,
expand access to learning opportunities, provide educational pathways to better careers and higher levels of learning, recognize learning no matter the source, make opportunities affordable, and help more students finish what they started.

These innovations are helping us answer the question of how to produce more college graduates and improve the educational attainment of all US citizens. As the federal government, and state governments as well, focus on ways to reduce overall spending, the survival of these programs will depend on political leaders who can continue to see postsecondary education and adult basic education as important investments in the nation’s future.

Editor’s note

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References


Lifelong learning in the USA: A focus on innovation and efficiency for the 21st century learner


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