

Campus Women Lead



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Success for Nontraditional Students at Elite Institutions By Gloria D. Thomas, director, and Carol Hollenshead, retired director, University of Michigan Center for the Education of Women

In its 2007 report *Returning to Learning*, Lumina Foundation declared that “adults’ success in college is key to America’s future” (Pusser et al., 1). According to the report’s analysis, without new efforts to educate the 54 million Americans who do not hold college degrees, the United States will continue to fall behind other nations in overall educational attainment. The report argued that “our task is to transform not only educational institutions, their students and communities, but also the state and national policies that shape them” (2).

In general, higher educational institutions have readily embraced this call, welcoming adult learners as an untapped market for tuition revenue. As a result, the old norm—an eighteen-to-twenty-four-year-old, financially dependent student enrolled at a four-year university—now comprises only 60 percent of all students enrolled in US higher education. The other 40 percent are “nontraditional students,” often defined as those who are twenty-five and older, but also including those who work full-time, enroll part-time, are financially independent, have dependents other than a spouse, are single parents, or do not have a high school diploma. Unlike the stereotypical traditional student, most nontraditional students enroll in community colleges and for-profit institutions. The majority are women (60 percent), and an increasing percentage (more than 10 percent) are African American or Hispanic (Paulson and Boeke 2006).

Despite their best intentions, too many nontraditional students who enter higher education with the goal of earning a degree leave without attaining either an associate’s or bachelor’s (Choy 2002). These students are frequently burdened with loans they cannot afford to repay, especially if they have attended expensive for-profit institutions. Yet various programs throughout the country have demonstrated that with appropriate financial, academic, and moral support, nontraditional students can earn their degrees, even at prestigious colleges and research universities. The University of Michigan’s Center for the Education of Women (CEW) offers one model where such success is common.

Comprehensive Support at the University of Michigan

Since 1964, CEW has provided comprehensive support to women returning to higher education to pursue undergraduate and graduate degrees. Rather than enacting “hit or miss” efforts to reach students, CEW plays a central role in their lives, offering scholarships, programmatic supports, and one-on-one counseling and emergency aid.

The CEW Scholarship Program for returning women students was established in 1970 to honor the academic performance and potential of women whose education has been interrupted and to commemorate the one hundredth anniversary of women’s admission to the University of Michigan. Scholarship applicants must attend the University of Michigan (Ann Arbor, Flint, or Dearborn campuses) during the year for which the scholarship is awarded and must have experienced a lapse in education of at least forty-eight months, consecutive or not, after graduating from high school. Thanks to the generosity of individuals and foundations, CEW has awarded more than 1,400 scholarships since 1970. In 2011, the center awarded forty-nine scholarships with an average value of \$6,000. These awards have an immeasurable impact for many students for whom they are the difference between completing a degree or not.

In addition to alleviating financial needs, CEW addresses life circumstances that may affect its nontraditional undergraduate students, who typically have one or more of the following traits: they are twenty-five or older, have children, and/or have transferred from a community college. The center works in partnership with other units throughout the university to meet these adult learners’ needs so they can focus their energies on attaining educational success. CEW advocates for students who have children to ensure that they have access to information and resources on quality childcare, financial subsidies to help defray childcare costs, and care at home for sick children. The center also runs an ongoing network to help community college transfer students acclimate to the university and access available resources.

In addition to these programmatic supports, CEW offers one-on-one educational and career counseling that is critical to nontraditional undergraduate students’ educational success. CEW’s adult learners are a diverse group who come to the university with busy lives, limited resources, and many responsibilities on top of their education. The majority of nontraditional undergraduate students who come to counseling appointments are parents (82 percent); married or living with a spouse or partner (52 percent); and/or have annual household incomes of less than \$25,000 (52 percent). Among those who reported their race and ethnicity, about one-third are African American, compared to one-quarter who are white. Many of these students seek CEW’s assistance in overcoming educational and career obstacles, lack of support from their families, lack of self-efficacy, and concerns about faculty interactions or course assignments. Others come for help with financial emergencies and are awarded Critical Difference Grants for unexpected expenses.

The data indicate that this combination of scholarship, programs, and one-on-one support is just what CEW's nontraditional students need to succeed. Not all of CEW's adult constituents are CEW scholarship recipients, but data collected by the center over the last ten years show definite successes for this subgroup. Between 2001 and 2011, 81 percent of CEW undergraduate scholars had graduated, while 15 percent were still working on their degrees and only 3 percent had discontinued their education.

Promising Models across Higher Education

The majority of nontraditional undergraduate adult learners do not seek educational opportunities at elite institutions like the University of Michigan. They are much more likely to turn to their local community college or the nearest branch of a for-profit institution. Nonetheless, those who are so inclined should be encouraged to pursue enrollment at elite institutions that have appropriate support structures. Likewise, elite institutions should build their infrastructure so nontraditional adult learners feel welcome and receive moral, academic, and financial assistance.

Fortunately, CEW's is not the only successful model for facilitating nontraditional students' pursuit of undergraduate education. Organizations like Lumina Foundation and the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation have both made nontraditional learners' achievements the focal point of their respective missions. While Lumina focuses on strategic change through research, publications, and policy, the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation provides funding for systemic programs that support low-income students in transitioning from community colleges to prestigious four-year colleges and universities. Several institutions also offer models for replication, including the University of Michigan–Dearborn's Student Outreach and Academic Resources (SOAR) program; Ohio State University's Office of Continuing Education and Critical Difference for Women program; Bryn Mawr College's McBride Scholars Program; and Wilson College's Adult Degree Program, to name only a few.

Especially in this time of financial stress, institutions may be reluctant to invest in services targeted to nontraditional students. Yet colleges and universities (particularly those with four-year residential campuses) invest heavily in programs and services directed toward traditional undergraduates, from residence halls to substance abuse prevention, from mental health counseling to athletics and cocurricular activities. These institutions should keep in mind that services for nontraditional students are not necessarily more expensive than services for traditional students, and some may even be less expensive. Often, students simply need encouragement and better information about resources already available to them. For example, Lumina found that nearly a third of adult students were unaware of available financial aid (Pusser et al. 2007). Peer support networks can provide mentoring and information to new students without straining student services. Linking students to community resources can also play a crucial role in fostering student success, as can targeting investments to the critical first year of enrollment, when students are most likely to drop out.

In sum, many colleges and universities are making significant efforts to ensure that higher education is not simply a revolving door for nontraditional students. But higher education can do much more. Successful models are worth replicating to meet the increasing demand for a more educated society. As clearly articulated by Lumina, "The knowledge economy and global industrial production have necessitated postsecondary education—individually and nationally" (Pusser et al. 2007, 1).

References

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Editor's note: Carol Hollenshead is a member of the Campus Women Lead Project on Inclusive Excellence. If you want to raise questions at your institution about how women can advance inclusive leadership in higher education by building multicultural alliances, consider bringing a Campus Women Lead workshop to your campus. For more information, visit our website at www.aacu.org/campuswomenlead.