Accelerating degree success for adult learners in uncertain times

By Alison Pugh and Steve Abercrombie

Are you overwhelmed? I know we are. How do you think our adult students feel? The value proposition of unlocking mid- and high-wage jobs in STEM careers through a degree is undeniable; however, the imperative to accelerate achievement is heightened with what students are facing in coming years. More work, less pay, economic uncertainty and increased family responsibility are just the start of the list.

Even before 2020 went awry, degree completion rates remained low despite years of attention on the issue. What should we do now that students are more overwhelmed than ever?

The STEM student profile has shifted from the majority being recent high school graduates to the majority being working adults, according to the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. Many highly skilled workers, such as military veterans, end up starting from scratch when pursuing a degree, even with years of skills and learning experiences.

Here are our lessons learned from two successive National Science Foundation Advanced Technological Education (NSF-ATE) project grants building degree programs at the intersection of technology, sustainability and building science. The ray of hope? At Seattle Colleges, we have the strongest enrollments we have seen yet in our Bachelor of Applied Science (BAS) program.

INTEGRATE PRIOR LEARNING ASSESSMENT (PLA) INTO YOUR PROGRAMS (FOR REAL).

Talk about velocity! PLA allows students to cut a year (or more) off study for an Associate of Applied Science Transfer Degree (AAS-T) and complete a BAS in two years or less providing they have the requisite work experience, training and certifications. While many community colleges have a PLA web page and maybe even a coordinator, our experience is that students don't take full advantage of this accelerator unless they are mentored through it. Equity and accessibility require a faculty mentor, which means building portfolio development and review into programs. It also means aligning faculty incentives and compensation to support students earning PLA credits.

In our BAS degree for Sustainable Building Science Technology (SBST), many students earn 18 credits through a PLA portfolio process where faculty mentor them. For our new associate degree in Multi-Occupation in Engineering & Technology (MOET), students can earn/transfer more than half of required credits for prior work and training either in the military or the workplace.

CAEL (the Council on Adult & Experiential Learning) and WICHE (Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education) recently published The PLA Boost, which asserts that PLA is one tool to close achievement gaps. By recognizing students' existing knowledge, skills and abilities and meeting them where they are, higher rates of program success is the outcome.

DEVELOP BACHELOR OF APPLIED SCIENCE DEGREE OPTIONS.

In Washington State, we offer more than 100 BAS degrees in areas/disciplines underserved by universities or where acute labor demand is not being met. BAS degrees at a community college mean students can complete a four-year degree without having to navigate an entirely different college/university system and culture.

In pandemic times, this option is even more important as many college-level students across the country remain close to home. BAS degrees create pathways for students completing associate-level technical degrees. For more research information on the subject, check out the University of Washington's Community College Research Initiatives' project, Scaling Community College Baccalaureate Degrees: The Equity Imperative.

TARGET WORKING ADULTS WHEN DEPLOYING YOUR PROGRAMS.

Face-to-face classes that meet on multiple weekdays work for a particular student profile—typically not full-time working adults. More and more community college students are juggling multiple responsibilities (particularly during the pandemic). COVID-derived creative destruction means examining how you are deploying your programs for long-term student engagement, retention and completion.

For our SBST and MOET programs, we integrate a hybrid approach where most instructional content is delivered online with face-to-face meetings incorporating highly engaging student activities and held at times when most working adults can attend, e.g. on four Saturdays a quarter for our SBST program.

INTEGRATE ACTIVE LEARNING.

This is particularly difficult in our current pandemic environment, but it is a major differentiator for adult students. Our MOET degree is employing a hands-on capstone that gets students into project-based work in sustainability, led by an experienced faculty member. Our sustainable building degree uses project-based learning, field experiences, hands-on learning and flipped classrooms to keep students engaged. ■

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