Assessing Adult Learners

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CAEL

Who is the adult learner?

- Generally, 25 years or older
- Working full-time, with kids; with other identities/roles
- 45% of U.S. undergrads over 25 years old
- 75% have a “nontraditional” aspect

Adult learner barriers

- Institutional: Policies and practices that impede and discourage adult learners
- Situational: Adult learner’s life situation or circumstances
- Dispositional: Adult learner’s personal concerns, beliefs, or attitudes
How to Assess Adult Learner Programs  
January 25, 2005

**Adult Learning Focused Institution Initiative**
- CAEL’s 1999 Benchmarking Study of six high-performing, adult-serving colleges and universities
- Best Practices in Adult Learning, released in 1999
- Study findings distilled into eight Principles of Effectiveness
  - The Principles of Effectiveness serve as the foundation for the Adult Learning Focused Institution (ALFI) Initiative

**ALFI Principle 1**
- Outreach
  - “The institution conducts its outreach to adult learners by overcoming barriers in time, place, and tradition in order to create lifelong access to educational opportunities.”

**ALFI Principle 2**
- Life and Career Planning
  - “The institution addresses adult learners’ life and career goals before or at the onset of enrollment in order to assess and align its capacities to help learners reach their goals.”

**ALFI Principle 3**
- Financing
  - “The institution promotes choice using an array of payment options for adult learners in order to expand equity and financial flexibility.”

**ALFI Principle 4**
- Assessment of Learning Outcomes
  - “The institution defines and assesses the knowledge, skills, and competencies acquired by adult learners both from the curriculum and from life/work experience in order to assign credit and confer degrees with rigor.”

**ALFI Principle 5**
- Teaching/Learning Process
  - “The institution’s faculty use multiple methods of instruction (including experiential and problem-based methods) for adult learners in order to connect curricular concepts to useful knowledge and skills.”
ALFI Principle 6

- Student Support Systems
  - “The institution assists adult learners using comprehensive academic and student support systems in order to enhance students’ capacities to become self-directed, lifelong learners.”

ALFI Principle 7

- Technology
  - “The institution uses information technology to provide relevant and timely information and to enhance the learning experience.”

ALFI Principle 8

- Strategic Partnerships
  - “The institution engages in strategic relationships, partnerships, and collaborations with employers and other organizations in order to develop and improve educational opportunities for adult learners.”

The Principles of Effectiveness are:

- Integrated – they work together
- Indivisible – they form a whole
- Imperative – not just “a good idea”

Assessing for Principles

- Workbook: Best Practices in Adult Learning
- Adult Learning Focused Institution (ALFI) assessment tools
  - Institutional Self-Assessment Survey
  - Adult Learner Inventory

Adult Learner Inventory

Julie Bryant
Senior Director of Retention Solutions
Noel-Levitz
How to Assess Adult Learner Programs
January 25, 2005

Adult Learner Inventory
• Survey to capture the experience of adult students in undergraduate programs

The Adult Learner Inventory
• ALI focuses on seven of the eight CAEL ALFI Principles—(strategic partnerships principle is not covered because students are unlikely to know about this area)
• Structure of the instrument follows the Noel-Levitz model with students indicating both the level of importance and the level of satisfaction for each item
• Items rated on a 1-7 scale (1 is low; 7 is high)

ALI Scores
Importance scores
• How important is it for your program to meet this expectation?
Satisfaction scores
• How satisfied are you that your program is meeting this expectation?
Performance gap scores
• The discrepancy between the expectation (importance score) and the reality (satisfaction score).

Matrix for prioritizing action
Institutional Strengths
Institutional Challenges

Institutional strengths and challenges
• Strengths:
  – What are your students’ expectations of you?
  – Where are you meeting or exceeding those expectations?
• Challenges:
  – What are your students’ expectations of you?
  – Where are you failing to meet those expectations?

Adult Learner Inventory: The survey
• 40 items rated for importance and satisfaction
• 10 optional items defined by the institution
• Version with enrollment factors is extended in length and includes:
  – 12 items – sources of information in decision to enroll (Web site, newspaper, television, etc.)
  – 17 items – pre-enrollment factors (cost, tuition reimbursement, flexible pacing, etc.)
• 2 summary items – overall satisfaction and likelihood student will recommend to other adult students
• 12 demographic items (gender, age, employment, etc.)
• 2 optional demographic items (one major/program and one other)
Sample items on the Adult Learner Inventory

- My program allows me to pace my studies to fit my life and work schedules.
- I am able to obtain information I need by phone, fax, email, or online.
- Sufficient course offerings within my program of study are available each term.
- I can receive credit for learning derived from my previous life and work experiences.

ALI National Comparison Group

- 38 institutions
  - 20 four-year privates
  - 8 four-year publics
  - 1 four-year proprietary
  - 9 two-year publics
- 19 different states and the District of Columbia
- 17,509 total student records

Results of the ALI pilot study are included in the 2003 National Adult Learner Satisfaction-Priorities Report

- Report available online:

Web administration

- Online accounts are set up by Noel-Levitz with approximately one week’s notice
- Survey is customized with institutionally-defined items
- Each student is provided with an individual numeric password to access the survey (randomly generated by Noel-Levitz) or the student ID or SSN can be loaded into the Noel-Levitz system
- Campus typically distributes invitation through personalized broadcast email or invites students to complete the survey during computer labs
- Students go to: http://survey.noellevitz.com

Institutional Self-Assessment Survey

Ruth Frey
Project Director, Lifelong Learning
CAEL
Institutional Self-Assessment Survey

- Part of the Adult Learning Focused Institution (ALFI) Assessment Tools
  - Part 1: Adult Learner Inventory (ALI)
  - Part 2: Institutional Self-Assessment Survey (ISAS)
  - ISAS completed by administration, faculty, and staff

Institutional Self-Assessment Survey

- Provides template for institution to honestly and reflectively examine resources, structures, and practices in light of the Principles.
- Works best as part of wider effort to identify areas of strength and challenge for purposes of continuous improvement.

Institutional Self-Assessment Survey

- Institutional and unit-level versions
  - Institutional: Adults enrolled in general student population (46 items)
  - Unit: Adults enrolled in a designated school or division (48 items)

Institutional Self-Assessment Survey categories

- Institutional background
- Mission, leadership, and organizational structure
- Tuition and financial aid
- Teaching and learning
- Faculty recruitment and development
- Student services
- Key constituencies

Institutional Self-Assessment Survey

- Most items use closed-end ratings
- Requests further information on items at the top of the scale

Example Item:

- To what extent does your institution partner with other organizations (community-based organizations, employers, other post-secondary providers) to deliver student support services:
  - Not at all
  - Not very much
  - Somewhat
  - A great deal
  - Almost always (provide examples on supplementary page)
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Institutional Self-Assessment Survey

- Completed by an institutional team
  - Administrators
  - Faculty
  - Staff

Institutional Self-Assessment Survey

- ISAS Team
  - 8-10 individuals representing various offices and divisions
  - Meet as a group to discuss and come to consensus
  - One survey is submitted to CAEL

Institutional Self-Assessment Survey

- Example ISAS Team:
  - Institutional research and planning
  - CEO/provost
  - Admissions
  - Deans/chief academic officer
  - Chief student affairs officer

Institutional Self-Assessment Survey and Adult Learner Inventory

- Comparative data:
  - Internal: The ISAS Team’s perspective vs. adult learner perspective for each scale
  - External: Your team’s and your students’ ratings vs. students and teams at other institutions that have used the ALFI Assessment Tools

Sample excerpt of ISAS score reporting

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ALFI Principle</th>
<th>ALFI U Score</th>
<th>Mean Score</th>
<th>Rank Order</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td>Outreach</td>
<td>55.0</td>
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<td>25</td>
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<td>54.7</td>
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<td>50.8</td>
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</tr>
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<td>Partnership</td>
<td>14.6</td>
<td>39.3</td>
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Sample excerpt of combined ALI and ISAS score reporting

Combined Results

ISAS & ALI for Regis University School for Professional Studies

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How institutions have used the tools

- Facilitated rich discussion and debate
- Targeted areas that need attention
- Focused attention on adult learner needs and issues
- Helped with accreditation, market niche reporting, planning, and evaluation

Case Study
SUNY Empire State College

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Empire State College

- State University of New York
- Began in 1971
- Innovative college for nontraditional students
- Today, serves 16,500 adult learners
- Liberal Arts, BA, BS, BPS, MA, MBA, MAT
- Seven regions, distance learning, corporate, labor, international, business, and military

Innovative and experimental

- Individualized curriculum/degree plans
- Work with one faculty mentor
- Via independent study, small groups, online courses, residencies
- Prior learning assessment and credit
- Enroll any Monday

ALI and ISAS: To do or not to do

- Curiosity – What will we learn about ourselves?
- Curiosity – What will we learn about our students?
- Curiosity – How will that learning affect our work?

We decided to do it because

- Adult learner institution
- Strong affiliation with CAEL
- Importance of national adult database
- Importance of our own data sets
- Excitement over tools created specifically for adult learners
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Administering the ALI

- Randomly among students with email addresses
- 47% responded for an N of 1,923
- Used series of strategic emails to prepare students
- Enlisted support of faculty mentors
- Survey conducted by registrar

Administering the ISAS

- Created cross-functional team – faculty, deans, student, support professionals, assessment professionals, members of functional offices
- Met in two-day retreats at conference center
- Goal: To reach consensus
- How: Leaving our egos behind

What happened?

- We did it!
- Answered 49 questions
- Wrote commentary
- Made recommendations to president and college
- Shared results at collegewide conference

What we learned from the ISAS

- Self-assessment is good
- Change should improve practice
- Cross-functional teams “rock”
- We need to be a “learning” organization

Self-assessment is good

- Make self-reflection a priority
- Create opportunities for dialogue
- Review practice regularly
- Review can mean change; deal with it

Change should improve practice

- Self-reflection and dialogue lead to:
  - What we do well and should enhance
  - What we could do better and should improve
  - What we don’t do at all and should do
Cross-functional teams “rock”

- Listening to each other across the great divides
- Developing a vision of how the whole college works – not just my piece
- Embracing our collective work

Be a “learning” organization

- Learn from students
- Learn from colleagues
- Learn from experience
- Learn from experiments
- Learn from other organizations
- Learn together

Change venues from the ISAS

- We need RESEARCH on student success and barriers to success
- We need the MATERIALS and the WEB SITE to be student-friendly
- We need ongoing PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT for all personnel
- We need a PLAN FOR CHANGE in academic support practices

The ALI – What’s important to our adult students?

- Life and career planning – thought we did this well; students thought we needed to do it better
- Outreach – Students said find us, bring us in, and help us succeed
- Student support – Students said: “Don’t let us fail once we’re here!”

What they thought (ALI) vs. what we thought (ISAS)

- They thought – better Life and Career Planning
- They thought – better outreach
- They thought – stronger student support systems
- We thought – major overhaul of Life and Career Planning (our degree planning)
- We thought – inconsistent outreach
- We thought – more and more consistent student support

As a result . . .

- President created a 20-member cross-functional team to draft a change plan for the college and to seek Title III Planning Grant and Development Grant over two-year period
- Title III Planning Grant was funded in 2004

WE AGREED!
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Development grant in process – six change initiatives

- Admissions, academic readiness, academic support services
- Educational/degree planning
- Prior learning assessment
- Communication
- Institutional research
- Retention and student success

Change: Work in progress

- Collegewide review and revision of educational planning/degree planning in process
- Changes in Web site and Web outreach
- Pilot call center
- Vice president for enrollment management

Assessing for the future

- Model of adult student retention and success
- Establishing baselines
- Tracking our students over time
- Learn from those who leave

At Empire State College
CAEL data set us in motion

- Pointed the direction for change
- Underpins the Planning Grant funded by the Department of Education
- Gave us tools

The ALFI tools

- Compare how you see yourself with how your students see you
- Are designed for adult learners
- Show how you rank compared to other adult-serving institutions
- Show your success on multiple measures
- Make your institution part of an adult-student comprehensive data set

Case Study
Marylhurst University

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Co-Chair Assessment Committee
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President: Dr. Nancy Wilgenbusch
www.marylhurst.edu
503-636-8141
Marylhurst University

- Founded in 1893 by the Sisters of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary as the first liberal arts college for women in the Pacific Northwest
- Reorganized in 1974 as a College for Lifelong Learning
- Became Marylhurst University in 1998, Carnegie Masters Level I
- Average age 37, 70% female
- Early adopter of online teaching and learning: 1996
- One of six institutions in CAEL’s benchmarking study for best practices in serving adult learners
- Charter ALFI Member

Marylhurst University

- Commitments and values
  - Centrality of a liberal arts education
  - One administrative structure, no “division of adult learning”
  - Believe division between traditional and adult students is no longer valid
  - Outcomes-based curricular structures
  - Accessibility: Multiple schedule formats (daytime, evening, weekend, online, compressed sessions)

Reasons for using the ALFI tools

- CAEL approached us and we jumped at the chance
- For 20+ years we had deliberately designed flexible curricular and administrative structures to meet the unique needs of adult and other nontraditional learners
- What we did was not “like” traditional universities, but many of us believed in what we were doing
- We wanted to compare our performance and practices to peer institutions and to “best practices” that specifically addressed adult learners
- Data is always useful, but only if it is meaningful in our institutional context
- We wanted a way for our students to tell us if our curriculum, policies, and administrative practices met their needs

Administering the ALI

- Administered by campus Assessment Committee
- Process suggested and boilerplate provided by Noel-Levitz and CAEL was extremely helpful
- Decided to survey all current students
- Challenge: We do not provide students with an e-mail address; ALI is an online survey
- Publicized through posters and flyers distributed in class in VPAA newsletter
- Sent e-mail and snail mail with pass codes
- Follow-up e-mails to non-respondents
- 33% response rate, evenly distributed across programs

Administering the ISAS

- Coordinated by campus Assessment Committee
- Committee recruited administrators, faculty, and staff from across campus to help complete portions of the survey relative to their areas of expertise
- Departments completed assigned survey items; Assessment Committee collected and synthesized the information looking for discrepancies
- Assessment Committee lead discussions to achieve consensus responses
- Process of completing ISAS prompted administrators and faculty to think about current policies and best practices

How ISAS results were shared

- ISAS survey results were circulated campuswide for final comments before it was submitted
- Collaborative approach to ISAS set the stage for the change
- For example, ISAS asks for institutional definition of an “adult student.” While completing ISAS Marylhurst developed new language that now guides usage in many of Marylhurst’s publications.
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How ALI results were shared

- ALI results were summarized on the basis of strengths and challenges according to matrix for prioritizing action suggested by Noel-Levitz
- Summary was distributed to administration and faculty, full results to selected departmental chairs, Assessment Committee, and those who asked
- ALI comparisons with national mean scores provided context for understanding institutional strengths and challenges

How the results were used

- ALI and ISAS indicated Marylhurst was serving its students better than the administration had anticipated
- Process occurred as we were entering a strategic planning process and “primed the pump”
- Results fostered specific initiatives in:
  - Community partnerships
  - Employment placement and counseling
  - Redesigning entering student seminar and MAP (Marylhurst Academic Portfolio)
- ALFI Principles served as categories of analysis within competitive scan in strategic planning process
- Marylhurst no longer feels like we are playing catch up, but rather focuses on staying abreast of the best practices in serving adult learners

Future assessment plans

- Results have been integrated into new vision statement, strategic plan, and upcoming accreditation self-study
- ALFI tools provide one of several strategies for institutional assessment as part of self-study; ALFI provides data keyed to serving adult and nontraditional demographic
- Will administer ALFI tools again in fall 2005; previous results will provide a baseline to measure effects of current practices

Why use ALFI tools?

- Tools are based on ALFI Principles of Effectiveness in serving students just like ours
- ALFI Principles provide a means for internal training and conversations about why Marylhurst is not “different” but rather dedicated to best practices in serving adult and nontraditional students
- ISAS provides a structured vehicle for self-reflection on institutional practices in serving adult students
- ALI is designed to gather student views concerning both importance of and satisfaction with policies and curriculum designed to serve adults
- ALI offers meaningful comparisons with peer institutions
- Combination of ISAS and ALI invites comparison between administrative and student views of institutional strengths and challenges

For more information on the Institutional Self-Assessment Survey contact:
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For more information on the Adult Learner Inventory contact:
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www.noellevitz.com
Polling questions:

- Which best describes adult assessment on your campus:
  1) We use our own instrument.
  2) We use an externally standardized instrument.
  3) We do not currently assess our adult programs.

- Are you very interested, somewhat interested, not interested in using one or more of the surveys discussed today?
  1) We are very interested.
  2) We are somewhat interested.
  3) We are not interested at this time.

Polling questions, continued:

- When are you most likely to survey with either or both of these instruments?
  1) Yet this term
  2) Fall 2005
  3) Spring 2006
  4) Not sure at this time

Question and answer time

- Please follow the instructions provided if you are interested in asking a question of the panelists.