

# An Assessment of an Adult Learning Model: Implications for Replication

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**Abstract:** In response to the national agenda to increase the number of adults with bachelor's degrees, East Stroudsburg University (ESU), a regional master-degree granting university, has implemented several degree completion programs geared towards non-traditional students. Using the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) "Eight Principles of Effectiveness for Serving Adult Learners," this study assessed the first three years of the program's implementation. This assessment used primary data collection, including a student and faculty survey. The study found that the program is replicating its teaching processes, use of technology for teaching, and advising and mentoring well. However, the assessment revealed that the program was weaker on three primary items more unique to adult learners: 1) Flexible financing options; 2) Awarding credit for prior learning; and 3) Enhancing strategic community partnerships. Parallels are drawn to similar challenges Europe faces in meeting the social dimension of the Bologna Process. The paper concludes that in order to implement successful degree completion programs, key in advancing completion goals and equity demands in both the U.S. and Europe, institutions need to commit themselves to going beyond the replication of traditional undergraduate programs, and plan for the long-term transformation of current models of education.

**Keywords:** Degree Completion; Models of Teaching; Adult Learners; Assessment; Bologna Process, Innovation in Higher Education.

## Introduction

Adults are increasing in numbers in American higher education. By 2016, adults, defined as age 25 and older, will represent 42% of students in post-secondary education (Aud, 2013). This growing population, combined with a shrinking high school population in some parts of the country, has led to competition for adult enrollment. Add to that the fact the United States is now 14<sup>th</sup> in the number of college degree holders, and increasing federal policy pressure to be first by 2020 (Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance, 2012). Colleges have responded by creating programs in accelerated formats, granting credits for competencies, establishing services specifically geared towards adults, and dedicating admission staff specifically to recruit adult students. However, graduation rates for adult students remain notoriously low, in part due to an increasing trend in student movement across institutions. In other words, students "swirl" in and out of two- or four- year institutions transferring multiple times (Li, 2010) and losing credits along the way because of rigid transfer policies. Students are no longer staying at the colleges where they started. The result is a nation of students who are starting college and not finishing, or taking upwards of eight years to finish.

This problem is not unique to the United States. As evidence by the goals of the Bologna process, European higher education institutions also struggle with student mobility between institutions, transferability of credits, completion rates, and educational access for underserved student populations (Clark, 2014). While both American and international institutions have, and continue to respond to meet these goals, the efficiency and success of programs designed to meet the needs of new student markets demand continued research in best practices. Ultimately, the success of

emerging student populations such as the adult student market, will assist institutions to progress national and international degree completion goals.

### ***Purpose and Significance***

In response to the national agenda and student demographic trends, East Stroudsburg University (ESU), a regional master-degree granting university, has implemented several degree completion programs geared toward adult students. This paper is an assessment of this pilot program's success at meeting degree completion goals for adult students including adult learning best-practice models, and the social goals of degree completion. The assessment was a key component of the institution's future planning to grow the programs from pilot status to institutionalized supported strategic initiatives. The lessons learned from the study may inform other American and European institutions in building new programs to meet the completion goals set by recent US educational initiatives and the Bologna process.

### ***Adult Education Strategies***

The commonalities of adult oriented programs surround the necessity for institutions to remove the barriers that adults typically face. Savvy consumer oriented adult students are shopping the market for programs providing them the right fit for their individual needs. To that end, institutions must market themselves as "adult friendly." The recent focus on outcomes in higher education also necessitates the need for institutions to demonstrate not only an adult oriented approach to education, but an approach that works. As a basis for instituting effective degree completion models, institutions can be guided by existing theories that contribute to the enrollment and retention of adult students.

Adult learning theory is founded on the need for an approach to teaching based on the way adults learn. Coined "andragogy" by Malcolm Knowles, the basic tenants are that adults are self-directed; actively involved in their learning; maximize prior experiences to absorb new knowledge; learn best in experiential environments; and are heavily influenced by their life factors while in school (Dunlap, Dudak, & Konty, 2012). Learning environments, therefore, should be relevant, respectful, and supportive to best accommodate adult learning.

Reflecting the principles of adult learning theory, and therefore serving as the framework for this study, the Council for Adult Experiential Learning (CAEL) developed "Eight Principles of Effectiveness for Serving Adult Learners" (2005). The principles are listed in Table 1 below and serve as a baseline of services that institutions need in order to be effective with adult students.

**Table 1.** Eight principles for serving adult learners.

Outreach	The institution conducts outreach to adult learners by overcoming barriers of time, place, and tradition in order to create lifelong access to educational opportunities.
Life & Career Planning	The institution addresses adult learners' life and career goals before or at the onset of enrolment in order to assess and align its capacities to help learners reach their goals.
Financing	The institution promotes choice using an array of payment options for adult learners in order to expand equity and financial flexibility.
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.
Teaching-Learning Process	The institution's faculty uses multiple methods of instruction (including experiential- and problem- based methods for adults to connect curricular concepts to useful knowledge and skills.
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.
Technology	The institution uses information technology to provide relevant and timely information and to enhance the learning experience.
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.

### ***Benefits of a Degree***

The need for policies and programs that facilitate degree completion would not be vital if there would be no benefits to degree completion. These benefits are rooted both at the individual and societal level. These are also specifically spelled out in the European Bologna Process.

#### *Individual benefits*

It has been widely documented that the benefits of a college degree are numerous. The financial benefits tend to be a primary driver of bachelor degree completion in the United States. Workers with a **bachelor's degree** earn about \$20,000 more per year than workers with a high school diploma or a General Educational Development (GED) certificate (Ryan & Siebens, 2012). Over a lifetime, this could mean a college graduate could earn approximately a half million more than a high school graduate (Schneider & Lin, 2011). Because of the financial benefits which include higher income and access to health insurance, college graduates live longer, are healthier, and have

healthier children (from infancy to adulthood) than high school graduates or even adults with some college but no degree (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2009). College graduates also see personal benefits including a greater sense of control over their lives, better social standing and higher levels of emotional and social support from friends and peers, social mobility, and an overall better quality of life (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2009).

These themes are echoed in the social dimensions component of the Bologna process. The primary tenants include lifelong learning, increased access to higher education, and cultural competence on the part of individuals (Clark, 2014). While the concept of lifelong learning varies across institution and needs further defining, the benefits of broadened access to the individual include increased mobility because of the ability to complete academic credentials without barriers related to social or economic standing (Clark, 2014). Additionally, as is true in the United States, the educational attainment of parents in Europe is positively correlated with that of their children (Clark, 2014). Finally, the mobility afforded via advanced degrees ensures an individual's competitiveness and preparation for the international job market.

### *Societal benefits*

College graduates also positively impact the financial health of states and nations by creating a competitive and healthy workforce. Because of their increased income, college graduates pay higher income tax which contributes to increased state budgets (Schneider & Lin, 2011). Low levels of college graduation have high direct costs, adversely affect the U.S. economy and contributing to socioeconomic inequity (Paulson, 2012). Additionally, the job market is changing such that employers who used to demand technical expertise are now demanding employees who have well-rounded skills including communication skills, problem solving and critical thinking. By 2020, approximately 15 million jobs will require a baccalaureate degree but only about 3 million Americans will have a degree (Angel & Connelly, 2011).

Again, the foundation of the Bologna process reinforces the societal benefits reaped from citizens with advanced degrees. The 2007 action line of the Bologna process sets the background for those benefits by calling for a student body as diverse as the European population in order that leaders and scholars have cross-cultural representation (Clark, 2014). Tracing back to the Lisbon Agenda, a major goal of the Bologna process is also to meet regional economic objectives "which seek to boost the competitiveness, dynamism and knowledge base of the European economy" (Clark, 2014). Increasing the numbers of college graduates will benefit employers, the workforce, and nations.

## **Results and Discussion**

The assessment was designed using CAEL's "Eight Principles of Effectiveness for Serving Adult Learners" as the theoretical framework, and the assessment benchmarks for this study. The results were organized and analyzed using the eight principles. In addition, the assessment was guided by the following two primary research questions:

- 1) Does the program accurately reflect adult learning theories?
- 2) What components of the programs input and process need to change to improve the product?

This assessment used primary data collection, which included a student and faculty survey. The student survey, a gap analysis, was given to 44 students at one of the extended learning locations. Faculty surveys were administered to 26 faculty who had taught in the programs. The survey employed similar language to the eight practices and included 20 questions. A total of 14 faculty responded. All responses were anonymous. Data from the two surveys were analyzed using descriptive statistics and some of the qualitative data was reviewed and coded into the eight best practices for institutions serving adult learners.

### **Results**

The student survey gap analysis data presented in table 2 shows student mean scores on the CAEL principles. Students were asked to measure existing programs and services against the standards: (1) Agree; (2) Agree Somewhat; (3) Disagree Somewhat; (4) Disagree. According to the student survey data, students agreed that ESU was achieving the standards relating to the more traditional pedagogical process. In other words it seems as if students feel the program is replicating its teaching processes and its use of technology for teaching and even its advising and mentoring well. However on three primary items: 1) Flexible financing options; 2) Awarding credit for prior learning; and 3) Enhancing strategic community partnerships, that are more unique to adult learners, the students rate the program much lower.

**Table 2.** Student mean scores compared to CAEL's principles of effectiveness.

<b>CAEL Principle</b>	<b>Mean student score</b>
Outreach	1.7
Life & Career Planning	1.52
Financing	2.09
Assessment of Learning Outcomes	2.02
Teaching-Learning Process	1.8
Student Support Systems	1.9
Technology	1.3
Strategic Partnerships	2.1

The faculty survey data, summarized in table 3 below, reflects faculty members' level of agreement that ESU's degree completion program achieved CAEL's standards. According to these results (grouped by CAEL's standards), faculty reported that the program needs to focus on the following principles: 1) Student support systems; and 2) Strategic partnerships. However the relatively high frequency of "Do not Know" responses, may indicate that the faculty lack the information of the available resources available to meet the specific needs of adult learners. Specifically, faculty seem not to be aware of services with regard to, life and career planning, financing and assessment of prior learning outcomes.

**Table 3.** Faculty rankings of ESU in comparison to CAEL's principles of effectiveness.

CAEL Principle	Strongly Agree and Agree	Strongly Disagree and Disagree	Do not Know
Outreach--times of courses	83%	8%	0%
Outreach--location	83%	8%	0%
Outreach--format	67%	20%	0%
Life & Career Planning	17%	16%	58%
Financing	8%	0%	83%
Assessment of Prior Learning Outcomes	42%	0%	58%
Teaching-Learning Process	83%	8%	
Student Support Systems	42%	25%	25%
Technology	66%	16%	
Strategic Partnerships	8%	41%	42%

### *Discussion*

The two primary research questions set out by the assessment are used to report the assessment's conclusions.

#### *Does the program accurately reflect adult learning theories?*

ESU's extended learning programs compare well to some of the benchmarks set by CAEL for institutions that effectively serve adult learners. The ESU degree completion model in its first phase of implementation focused on providing access to higher education programs through location, format, and flexible times. Hence the program was rated well by students and faculty on: times of courses; location; format and the learning process.

The areas that are in need of improvement include 1) Providing flexible financing options; 2) Awarding credit for prior learning; 3) Enhancing strategic community partnerships; and 4) Increasing student support systems primarily in advising and academic support. This assessment highlights that for degree completion programs to be fully implemented they require attention to ancillary support services that are also the more specialized services for degree completers and may be part of a second phase of implementation.

#### *What components of the programs input and process need to change to improve the product?*

While one of the weaknesses of the evaluation is that it does not suggest causal relationships, the assumption is that if students feel more satisfied, and have the services they need, graduating student numbers may increase. To improve the program inputs

and processes, in addition to the recommendations made in the answers to the question above, ESU may want to consider the following list of improvements:

- Increased availability to academic advising and support (faculty and peer)
- Analyze need for additional course schedules, programs, and relevant services
- Increase life and career planning (both prior to enrollment and during)
- Assist faculty to develop alternate methods of instruction to appeal to adult learners
- Investigate and standardize quality of courses offered in extended learning programs
- Conduct faculty orientation to ensure they are aware of services available to students
- Improve new student orientations to be inclusive of ancillary services
- Increase technology support and training for faculty at off campus locations
- Increase campus initiatives in developing strategic partnerships to adult learners

The findings from the assessment reveal the underlying factors long suspected to be affecting the slow development of degree completion programs – a poor institutional fit, and increasing human capital needs. This assessment has shown that despite ESU's institutional commitment to these programs, its significant investment in infrastructure (a new teaching site), in faculty time and its moderate investment in human capital for program administration, the program has struggled to address the distinctive requirements for degree completers within its institutional culture. The resources invested have allowed for the degree completion programs to replicate the institution's good undergraduate teaching and advising tradition to the new sites and the new populations, however the mere replication of these processes to the new venues and new populations does not mean that they are the right fit for adult learners.

## **Conclusions**

Clark (2014), in a review of the past 15 years of Bologna, cites factors necessary for Bologna to meet its goals of expanding access to traditionally underserved populations. These include transferability; minimizing barriers for diverse students; employability; completion; and mobility.

This assessment found that the needs of adult learners surround: 1) Providing flexible financing options; 2) Awarding credit for prior learning; 3) Enhancing strategic community partnerships; and 4) Increasing student support systems primarily in advising and academic support.

The factors identified in this assessment that support adult degree completion--financial support, dedicated admission representatives, outreach recruitment programs, career counseling services, flexible learning pathways, previous learning assessments, and external strategic partnerships--are similar to those needed for a successful implementation of the Bologna process.

According to Clarke (2014), the eventual measure of the efficacy of the Bologna process will be in the implementation details--details that rely on buy-in from institutions and faculty in a bottom-up process, a similar experience to that found in this

assessment. These needs are not addressed by the simple replication of traditional undergraduate student models. Rather, a systems change that encompasses the best components of andragogy in- and outside- of the classroom is required.

This transformation, because of the scarcity of resources at many higher education intuitions, will at the very least require a refocusing of existing human capital. This assessment suggests that institutions new to degree completion, like ESU, may not be able to start with all of best practices, but still need to plan for a phased-in implementation of programs and ancillary services unique to the needs of vulnerable populations. As is true with most pilot programs, the first phase includes the build-up and adaptation of existing areas of expertise to increase access to populations who would not otherwise have it.

Full implementation, however, requires a potential second and even third phase where the specialized degree completion services follow after a period of refocusing limited resources. The lessons from this assessment should contribute to the growing evidence of best practices and potentially serve as a model for baseline needs of new programs. If new programs can replicate this idea of a phased-in implementation from the start, it may limit the learning curve to improve student retention and completion, thereby increasing efficacy and efficiency.

The process of expanding higher education access to under-served, new student markets requires a dual and somewhat contradictory process – universalization of institutional commitment but at the same time the development of a niche expertise and human capital that can respond to the needs of the population. In the long term, higher education may discover that the models that work for degree completers are worth universalizing to all student populations to meet national and international completion goals. However, in the short-term, to advance completion goals for the fastest growing student population in US, and to meet the demands of equity in Europe, institutions need to commit not to replicating, but transforming current models of education.

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