2018

Higher Education, Adaptive Change, and the Adult Learner: Moving from Academic Access to Transformative Excellence

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Introduction

Adults and working professionals are increasingly returning to college to upgrade their competencies or to gain a necessary credential that will help them improve their career opportunities (Kirst and Stevens, 2015). As a result, colleges and universities, particularly those with a long history of focusing on 18- to 24-year-old students, are facing the challenge by realigning their program delivery and support systems to admit, serve, and integrate their growing adult learner population.

Due in part to the unique needs of the adult learner population, institutions must make a concerted effort to use innovative, adaptive, and forward-looking practices across several of their operational and service delivery units. The supporting transformative excellence model (STE) provides a framework that adaptive institutions can use to evaluate and adjust existing practices.

To demonstrate how STE can assist an institution of higher learning in adapting to the needs of adult learners, we first present the story of Sherri, a dislocated worker who wishes to return to university to start a new career. Sherri's story illustrates the challenges and opportunities faced by many institutions who seek to serve adult learners. Then we will look at how the STE framework can provide strategies to better serve students like Sherri.

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Sherri Heads Back to College

Sherri is a prototypical adult learner. She fits the definition of a dislocated worker, since she lost her former job and is unlikely to return to her previous occupation (Lordeman, 1992). Armed with an associate degree in accounting that she earned at a private two-year college in 1990, Sherri decided to enroll at a regional public university near her home in the Mid-Atlantic region of the U.S. to pursue a bachelor's degree in public relations. Sherri wishes to gain a "new set of skills" for an event planning career, given her previous seven years of experience working for a mid-size catering company. Sherri has completed three semesters at the university.

She has almost quit the program twice since she started in the fall of 2016. Nevertheless, she has been able to hang on and push through despite the challenges that she has faced at the school. Sherri is undeterred because she wishes to obtain the necessary skills to improve her job prospects. Moreover, Sherri wishes to achieve a "more stable life" so that she may put her three preteen children on a better path for the future. Unfortunately, five major barriers stand firmly in the way of Sherri's plan to obtain her bachelor's degree.

Five Key Barriers Faced by Sherri

Barrier I: Lack of welcoming onboarding and orientation. Sherri said a major challenge is the lack of a welcoming atmosphere for students like her at the school. Sherri described her orientation to the school as "confusing and disappointing."

Barrier II: Unclear pathway to degree completion. Sherri came back to college to complete her bachelor's degree as quickly as possible so she can return to work full time. However, she has found that there are hidden requirements in her program, such as proficiency in a foreign language and the need to attend a certain number of cultural events at the school. Sherri feels that these types of requirements make it difficult for post-traditional students to complete their degrees on time. Sherri also thinks that her institution needs to do a better job explaining all noncurricular degree requirements to students like her so they can fully gauge how long it will take to finish their degree program.

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Barrier III: Inability to leverage her prior learning and work experience. Sherri noted that many of the prerequisite courses she has had to take were irrelevant and redundant, requiring her to cover content she had already learned from her work experience. She found herself having to take these courses because the other required course options were offered at times that were not convenient for her. Sherri also reported that some of the courses she had to take, particularly the introductory ones, made limited use of her background and experience.

Barrier IV: Few or traditional-semester-only course options. Sherri expressed that finding the right courses to take in a given semester has been a major battle since many required courses are only available during the day or follow the traditional 15-week semester. She said that she has considered changing her major to teacher education to remain in school. However, her dream is to complete her degree in public relations and begin a career in that field.

Barrier V: Inadequate academic and career support. Sherri reported that when she started the program she did not have a good grasp of how to best use the variety of technologies she was required to employ and expected to know as part of her coursework. She went on to say that once adult learners like herself have been admitted to the university, very little conscious effort is made to provide support outside of normal working hours.

The Supporting Transformative Excellence Framework

As Sherri's story indicates, adult learners who return to school after a significant absence face many barriers and challenges to completing their degree programs. As a result, higher education institutions (HEIs) seeking to serve those learners must make a dedicated effort to create an environment that responds to their needs, interests, and concerns.

Supporting transformative excellence (STE) offers guidance to HEIs seeking to strengthen their overall support of their adult learners. STE uses the paradigm of academic pillars (APs) to delineate the areas of adaptivity within an institution and then incorporates transformative elements (TE)—unique interventions that can be manipulated according to an institution's mission or structure—to give an HEI the necessary insight to provide effective and consistent support and service to adult learners. As illustrated below the APs and TEs are guided by the institution's overall mission, goals and objectives.

As shown in Figure 1, the mission, goals and objectives of the institution serve as the guiding principles. These are often embedded in an institution's vision statement and strategic plan. The mission, goals and objectives are thus represented as a truss, which is to signify that they provide internal stability and offer overarching purpose to the STE framework. There are five APs, which are leadership, culture, curricula, technology, and administration and five TEs, which are engagement and outreach, program design, instruction delivery, learner support, and lifelong learning. The details of the APs and TEs of the STE framework are presented below.

Figure 1: The STE Framework
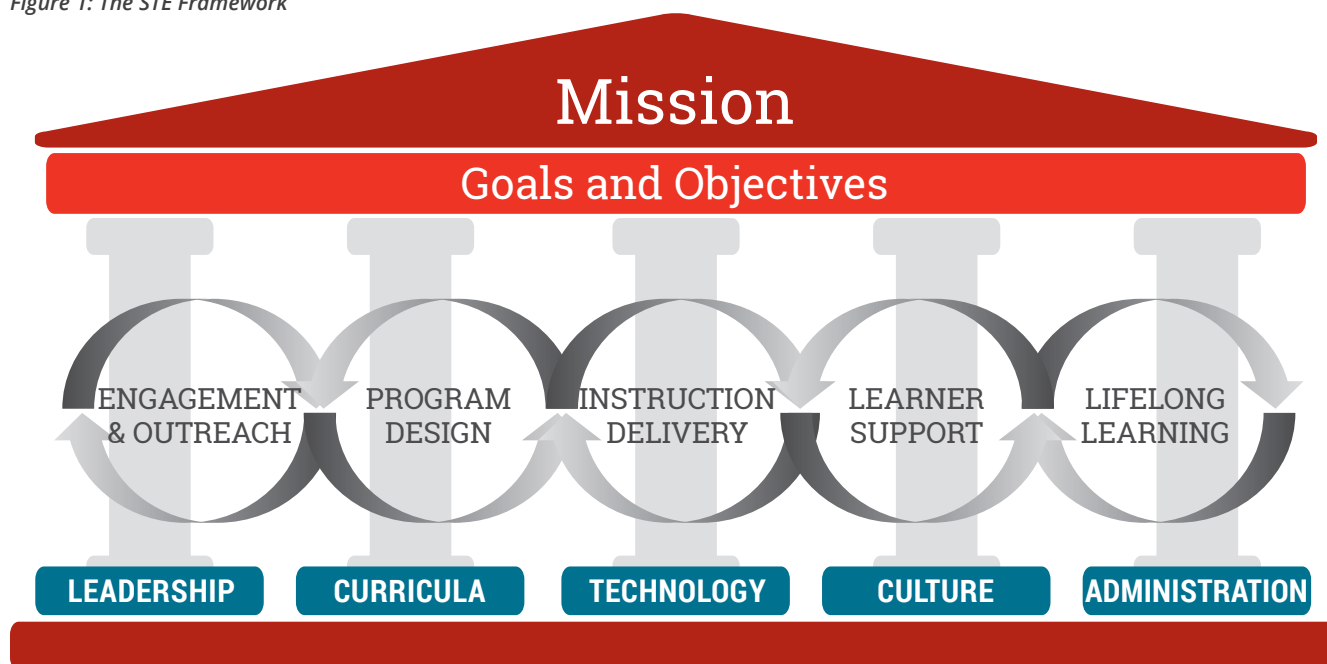
The Academic Pillars of STE

The academic pillars represent established academic norms or conditions at the institution. Some of the APs are explicit or overt, such as curricula and technology. As a result, they are quite easy to observe, understand, and analyze. Some are both explicit and implicit, such as leadership and administration. These may be signified by certain markers. However, they may also have hidden cultural components,

such as personal connections, relationships or even conflicts. On the other hand, culture is implicit, or hidden and thus can be difficult to discern, review, and evaluate without greater investigation. Nonetheless, all of the APs form the environmental context of an institution.

AP 1: Leadership. The senior personnel has oversight on all aspects of the institution, including setting the vision, allocating resources, and negotiating priorities. Leadership, therefore, must solidly endorse a focus on enrolling and supporting more adult learners at an institution to ensure its success over the long run.

AP 2: Culture. While often hidden, the culture of an academic institution can serve either as an enabler or inhibitor to a change in focus, such as on a new degree program that serves adult learners. Institutions with cultures of innovation will more readily support the accompanying activities involved in change while others that have more rigid cultures may require sustained nudges to achieve the goal of serving adult learners.

AP 3: Curricula. Higher education institutions differentiate themselves mainly by the strength, breadth, and depth of their curricula. The buy-in and support of faculty who own the curricula are necessary conditions in developing programs to serve adult learners. Moreover, the faculty must be provided the support needed to gain a greater understanding of instruction and assessment methods and practices best suited for the adult learner population.

AP 4: Technology. Technology systems and tools are essential components of every academic institution's service delivery and administrative support strategy—from how students apply and register for classes to the use of digital learning tools for instruction. The available technology infrastructure at the school is, therefore, an integral part of intervention efforts to better serve adult learners.

AP 5: Administration. The administrative staff is the backbone of an institution. The individuals working in offices such as admissions, academic support, marketing, career services, the library, and alumni affairs in many ways provide the support and scaffolding to help adult learners obtain new skills and competencies while they are in school.

The Transformative Elements of STE
The transformative elements of STE are items that institutions can manipulate and customize to address the needs and requirements of the adult learner. Adaptive institutions must take concrete and measurable steps, such as the ones described here, to meet the existing as well as future needs of the adult learner.

TE 1: Engagement and Outreach
Institutions need to develop adaptive engagement and outreach practices to eliminate barriers to academic access, progress, and success for their adult student population. Below are some approaches and strategies to achieve this aim.

Remove financial barriers to entry. Many HEIs create unnecessary financial barriers for adult learners, such as application and

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registration fees. By taking a costs versus benefits approach to fees charged to those learners, HEIs will be in a position to lower barriers to entry for adult learners while also increasing their overall tuition revenue.

Partner with junior or community colleges. Community college partnerships are helpful to adult learners as they map a clear path between an associate degree and a bachelor's degree in the partner institution. These pathways can start as articulation agreements. However, the establishment of collaborations between community and junior colleges with four-year institutions can create streamlined degree planning options for students such a 2+2 model, with students completing 2 years at a community college and seamlessly matriculating into their final two years in a four year program or 3+1 degree programs, where students complete 3 years of course work at a community college before matriculating to a four-year institution for a final year of advanced work and completion of a bachelor's degree. These intentionally designed programs bridging opportunities across institutions will offer clearer pathways to degree completion for students like Sherri.

Maximize transfer credit opportunities. Adult learners often have transfer credits, which could come from multiple institutions. Transfer credit policies and processes that leverage adult learners' academic backgrounds lower barriers to admission and matriculation by those students.

Adapt orientation activities. A streamlined and tailored orientation to campus for adult learners eases their transition to academic life and will enhance the likelihood of their success at the institution. These orientations should also offer social and networking opportunities to help adult learners achieve a sense of community at their institution.

Include prior learning assessment. The opportunity to receive credit for prior learning assessment (PLA) is a critical part of programs oriented to the adult learner (Rust, Brinthaupt, & Adams, 2017). In addition to providing cost savings, credits earned through PLA help shorten the time to degree for the adult learner.

TE 2: Program Design
Adult learners come to school with a wealth of life and professional experiences. They are also in very different stages of psychological, socio-cultural, and cognitive development compared to traditional college-aged students (Merriam & Bierema, 2014). Program design is one of the most important areas through which institutions can be responsive to adult learners.

Tailor the academic offerings. In Sherri's case, the program that she wishes to study is currently only available on-campus during the day. Programs that are developed in partnership with potential employers, focused on high demand career opportunities in the local region, offered in the evening, or delivered online stand the greatest chance of meeting adult learners' academic needs and professional interests.

Offer accelerated programs. Unlike their traditional undergraduate counterparts, most adult students go back to school with a clear academic goal and the expectation of a solid return on investment. Therefore,

academic institutions should explore alternative delivery formats such as weekend offerings, 8-week terms, online options, and prior learning class projects when rolling out a program or course with a focus on adult learners.

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Provide graduate pathways. Curricula that are developed for adult learners need to be in sync with their career interests. By offering a clear and smooth pathway to their program of choice, adult learners can move directly into a bachelor's degree program connected to their desired career or field. Such approaches will allow adult learners like Sherri to complete their degree programs as quickly and efficiently as possible.

TE 3: Instructional Delivery
Adult learners seek the opportunity to study in flexible formats that allow them to balance professional and family obligations. Specific pedagogical strategies that recognize the knowledge and experience of adult learners and maximize both flexibility and predictability are essential.

Use active learning approaches. Student engagement is a key element of student success, and one which needs different consideration for adult learners (Inverso, Kobrin, & Hashmi, 2017). Some of the strategies for engagement identified include active learning strategies, deep approaches to learning, and reflective and integrative learning.

Emphasize flexible formats. Active learning strategies require students to be engaged and proactive. Online and blended formats also allow flexibility for learners to complete assignments interactively and on their own schedule. Competency-based learning is another option that recognizes a learner's individual pace and allows for flexible movement through desired learning outcomes.

Make use of predictable and flexible course scheduling. Adult learners have many responsibilities they have to juggle. Thus, they need to have predictable course schedules that are adaptive to their needs. For example, evening and weekend offerings meet the needs of learners who work during the day. The use of course offerings that meet on the same evening throughout the program can help learners commit to their program of study and develop a routine.

TE 4: Learner Support
The policies and procedures adopted by an institution will set the stage for success of the adult learner. Dedicated advising and wrap around support services should be considered as essential aspects of the adult student's learning experience.

Provide dedicated professional advising services. Advising and support services need to be tailored to the needs of adult learners. Adaptive institutions must take the extra step to ensure that each student has one point of contact to provide guidance to the university's services and assist with specialized needs for adult learners such as veterans and single parents.

Include financial aid planning support. Adult learners who return to school are making a significant financial commitment to earn their bachelor's degree. Dedicated financial aid staff should be available to guide adult learners through completing required financial aid forms, such as FAFSA. These staff members should also help students understand financial aid policies, processes, and requirements including appropriate use of a student loan for their education.

Offer just-in-time and comprehensive tutoring. Adult learners need just-in-time support for academic questions and tutoring support that includes the entire process of crafting a paper, project, or presentation from conceptualization to the use of technology in support of the concept. Dedicated tutoring support for technology is needed as well. As in the case of Sherri, such service offerings can help adult learners bridge any gap in understanding relevant technology.

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TE 5: Lifelong Learning

According to Knowles (1980), the adult student is self-directed, internally motivated, and brings a wealth of life experience and knowledge (Merriam & Bierema, 2014). Institutions seeking to address the needs of the adult learner will need to utilize instructional models and approaches that support the adult learner both as a student and a practitioner.

Utilize experiential learning. Rooted in Kolb's (1984) model, experiential learning incorporates reflection along with practical experience. As adult learners yearn to connect new knowledge with their backgrounds and interests, it is critical to offer them the means to both leverage and strengthen their skills, competencies, and career orientations. Further, many adult learners are already closely engaged in the non-academic world. As a result, they must constantly negotiate their various identities and roles as they wrestle with uncertainty about their ability to manage college-level courses (Kasworm, 2006). Therefore, classroom activities and assessments designed for adult learners must be connected to the "real world" to ensure that they are fully engaged, involved, and invested in the learning experience.

Employ adaptive learning and asynchronous delivery. Adaptive learning refers to instruction that is tailored to learners' needs based on early and on-going assessment of the learner's skills and knowledge (Howard, Remenyi, & Pap, 2006). With asynchronous delivery, learning activities can be adapted to the learner competency level. Moreover, the use of adaptive learning with asynchronous delivery provides the possibility for immediate feedback to adult learners to increase both understanding and self-efficacy (Bandura, 1991; DiBattista & Gosse, 2006). With recent advances in intelligent tutoring systems, software applications and platforms allow achievement of content mastery. The use of technology systems to deliver immediate feedback to adult learners, and to inform them when human intervention is necessary, perfectly leverages the strengths of technology and of instructors to improve learning outcomes.

Focus on professional development. Adult learners have strong roots and connections to a particular profession or industry (Merriam & Bierema, 2014). Some adult learners may have years of work experience in traditional fields such as healthcare and education. Others may be involved or interested in

new and emerging industries like information technology and the life sciences. HEIs that regularly review how course offerings meet the professional development needs of adult learners will be in the best position to continually serve these students.

Linkage between the Academic Pillars and Transformative Elements of STE

Table 1: Academic Pillars and Transformative Elements of STE

Elements / Pillars	Engagement and Outreach	Program Design	Instruction Delivery	Learner Support	Lifelong Learning
Leadership	🔗				🔗
Culture	🔗		🔗	🔗	🔗
Curricula		🔗	🔗	🔗	🔗
Technology		🔗	🔗	🔗	🔗
Administration	🔗			🔗	🔗

Table 1 illustrates the connections and linkages between the APs and the TEs of the STE model. While all of the APs have some impact on each TE, as noted, TE Engagement and Outreach is most strongly influenced by an institution Leadership, Culture and Administration. Likewise, Program Design is closely linked to Curricula and Technology. Instruction Design on the hand is influenced by the Culture, Curricula and Technology. The TE Learner Support is linked strongly to all of the APs except Leadership. Finally, Lifelong Learning is connected to all of the APs of the STE framework. Thus, by reorienting the focus of a given AP, higher education institutions can utilize the applicable TE to put themselves in position to meet existing as well as future needs of adult learners.

Conclusion

Adaptive change in organizations, such as colleges and universities, which have complex administrative systems, enduring operational processes, unique cultures, and a well-defined ethos, requires a substantial push and sustained effort throughout the entire enterprise. Adult learners like Sherri—who has struggled to find her place in her institution—must be provided a valid and legitimate opportunity to complete their postsecondary education (Rabourn, BrckaLorenz, & Shoup, 2018). For an institution that adopts an adaptive approach like STE, Sherri would be recruited into a career-oriented program tied to her professional interests. She would experience an admissions process where her prior learning experiences are counted toward degree requirements. Sherri would also be allowed to select courses that were not redundant with her prior learning and professional experience. When encountering course requirements with familiar concepts, she would be offered the option to test out of taking repetitive content. Sherri's orientation would be geared toward adult learners, allowing her to feel that she belongs at her school. Moreover, as Sherri takes courses, face-to-face class time would be maximized for active learning, and asynchronous learning activities would add flexibility as to when and where learning

occurs. Thus, the use of a model like STE can help bridge barriers in time, place, and tradition, allowing higher education institutions to fully realize their academic, service, and social missions. Institutions wishing to reposition themselves to serve adult learners can use the transformative elements of STE to strengthen program and service offerings to their adult learner constituents. Moreover, by intentionally taking proactive steps to nudge the academic pillars of the STE model to diversify and expand their mix of stakeholders, HEIs will create the required campus atmosphere that allows adult learners to obtain a solid education while pursuing their lifelong dreams.

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