Shifting Student Support to Adult Learners

THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION®

Provide integrated, intelligent, and personalized services to your students with the cloud

Given the wide range of services and programs most institutions have in place to support students – from advising and tutoring, to mental health counseling and resources for the underrepresented – it is hard to understand why nearly one out of every three first-year college students fails to return. While such programs are well-intended, they often approach student success with a limited view and do not meet students where they are on their learning journey.

Colleges and universities are under pressure to address these shortcomings to meet the complex needs of a rapidly diversifying population of college applicants and students. As an Executive Education Advisor at Amazon Web Services (AWS), I have a front-row view of how many institutions are doing just that with the cloud.

For example, a prominent mid-western institution developed a machine learning based advising tool that helps students map out the shortest path to their degree. Another established western community college developed a financial aid tool that tracks applications and awards the way Amazon tracks purchases and deliveries.

Institutions all over the world are implementing cloud-based student lifecycle management solutions, virtual campus assistants, digital one-stop services, and solutions to support student wellness and mental health.

An integrated, intelligent, and personalized approach to meeting your students' needs is imperative to your institution's success. AWS stands ready to help you and your team meet that imperative.

Sincerely,

Mark

Mark C. Hampton, Ph.D.
Executive Education Advisor, Amazon Web Services

"Colleges and universities are under increasing pressure to provide integrated, intelligent, and personalized services to their students. AWS provides them with the tools to meet the needs of every student, wherever in the journey that student is."

Mark C. Hampton, Ph.D.

aws

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Key Takeaways From a Virtual Forum
Presented by *The Chronicle* and AWS

MODERATOR   **SPEAKERS**

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Colleges are increasingly seeking to attract and retain nontraditional-age learners. However, meeting their needs means rethinking student-support services, which have long catered to students ages 18 to 22. How can colleges change their approaches to better support a growing population of students focused on career growth? How, specifically, do the needs of adult learners differ from those of traditional-age students? What are colleges doing to provide a similar level of support for learners who need a different pathway? And how should student-support offices and roles change?

To gain insight into what strategies are working, *The Chronicle* held a virtual forum, "Shifting Student Support to Adult Learners," on August 2. The following comments, which have been edited for clarity and length, represent key takeaways from the forum. To hear the full discussion, watch the recorded webinar here.

Liz McMillen: How did adult learners go from being an afterthought to something much more central to the conversation?

Matt Bergman: The vast majority of funding — scholarships and grants — is still going to traditional-age students, even as nontraditional-age students compose up to 40 percent of overall college enrollment. Now that the "demographic cliff" is coming, adult learners are becoming part of the conversation. We're seeing more institutions impart elements of adult-learner friendliness into their mission and their vision.

McMillen: What are some of the barriers adult students face in trying to pursue their degrees? And how can colleges help them?

Tracy Robinson: For many adult learners, it's not their intention to stop out, but sometimes just to pause — and that lasts longer than they originally intended, and they're not sure how to take that next step. They think their credits have expired, they're not sure what office to start with. Are they going to have to talk to four or five offices to get an answer? Quite frankly, with a full-time job and full-time responsibilities with family, friends, and their community, they just don't know how they're going to fit it in. It's our duty to help them see that it's possible.

> **"We're seeing reports of individuals losing up to 40 percent of their credits if they transfer. That is just a justice issue."**

Bergman: We're seeing reports of individuals losing up to 40 percent of their credits if they transfer. That is just a justice issue. Many of the folks on this panel — and many of our other colleagues serving adult students — are trying to make sure we count everything that's college-level and credit-worthy through prior learning assessments, but also through transfer — making sure we account for everything they've done in the past, so we create more efficient pathways to the finish line.

Hadass Sheffer: This may be harsh to say, but I remember hearing from universities that they viewed adult students as cash cows. It's become normalized for an institution to charge these people. They want to come back, they don't have a lot of options. Universities are factoring that into their budgets. There is a justice issue here, but there's also an economic issue. Universities are going to have to adjust to how they look at this population if they want to make good on their promise of education.

Nilajah Nyasuma Sims: At Morgan State, we've been very intentional about funding adult students. We know from the literature — and from our personal institutional experience — that financing education is the No. 1 reason why

students stop out to begin with.

We have the Bernard Osher scholarship program and the Crankstart Foundation's scholarship program to help make sure adults who are returning are able to be supported, not just with tuition but with other expenses. To help students balance work and life obligations, we've developed some successful pilot partnerships with our counseling center and our career center as well as tutoring to help students navigate those challenges. Adults returning need flexible degree options and to be participating in degrees that align with industry.

McMillen: How well are institutions taking account of adult students' prior learning?

Bergman: It's going much better than it was. I use the analogy of online learning 10 years ago — there was a lot of skepticism. There's still skepticism, but it's part of the fabric in which we operate as colleges. The same thing will be true of credit for prior learning. My prediction is they're going to standardize it so it's widespread. We've got the Prior Learning Assessment Network, with more than 100 institutions connecting to share best practices and be in solidarity on how we institutionalize credit for prior learning. We've learned a ton from the Graduate! Network, the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning, and the University of Memphis.

Sheffer: Credit for prior learning is amazing, but students need to know to ask. The process can be long. We're putting all the burden on students. They are transient in this system, and they are at the biggest disadvantage. We need to shift things around. What if we had a conversation with each incoming student, asking them what they've done in their lives so far that could be applied to credit and shorten their time at the institution?

McMillen: What are we learning about online preferences for adult students?

Bergman: We're seeing a shift toward more online students who are adult learners. Not surprisingly, we're seeing more traditional students take online classes, even if they're sitting on a residential campus, because of the flexibility. We have a lot of students choosing asynchronous environments, because of the flexibility — stating directly that they prefer to be in person but

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that because of their busy life schedules they are choosing to be online. We're seeing that nationally.

Robinson: It's so important to have online orientation and all the wraparound supports like counseling services. We think about how to make sure a University of Memphis student feels like a University of Memphis student even if they're living in California.

McMillen: How do you get that student in California to feel a connection to the University of Memphis?

Robinson: We send a lot of mailings. We send a mousepad with University of Memphis branding. We have virtual communities they can join to get to know other students. We do a lot with athletics — when they're traveling to another state for a football game and we have a high number of online students in the area, we may do a free-ticket giveaway to have them come to the game.

Sims: For our adult students on scholarships at Morgan State, we have required orientations and wrap-up sessions every semester. As a result, we've seen students develop their own communities.

McMillen: What could campuses be doing differently?

Sheffer: More of those services should be available online and "just in time." We live in a "just in time" economy. If I want to cancel my cable subscription, I want to be able to do that at 3 a.m. Students want the same thing.

More forgiveness about deadlines — registration deadlines, deadlines for applying for credentials. Make things more transparent and visible on websites, which is where adults get the information they need.

Robinson: We need to rethink everything, including marketing, social media, and our websites. Pictures need to be inclusive of nontraditional and traditional learners.

There's also the issue of stranded credits. We all penalize students when they leave our institutions and owe money. We don't release their transcripts to them, which means they can't go to another institution and restart — or come back to our institutions — until they pay their balances. It's a major roadblock for so many adult learners.

We need entryways — very quick and efficient paths to short-term, stackable opportunities. I'm talking about noncredit and credit opportunities to get a taste of what it's like to learn something of high value and direct application. We need to change our minors to certificates. Every minor at your university should turn into a certificate. It should be a quick pathway to something of

value to the marketplace.

McMillen: What about the role of faculty? What do they need to change about their classroom practices?

Bergman: Some faculty members don't like the idea of teaching nontraditional students, but when they engage they're often converts, because of the level of commitment of these learners.

We've held some classes off campus with employer partners who are sending some of their employees back. We incentivize faculty to engage in these courses.

Sheffer: I wonder if it could be helpful for colleges to hire and lift up more faculty members who come from a nontraditional background themselves — whether that might slowly change the culture.

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McMillen: What do you see on the horizon for adult learners?

Bergman: I see industry partnerships as the new era of prosperity in higher education because of the three-pronged approach to connecting with industry — a pipeline of learners to skill up, an opportunity to be reciprocal in sending graduates out for jobs with those employers, and leaving students with little-to-no debt as a result of tuition assistance.

Robinson: There are more robust conversations between higher ed and industry these days, and I'm looking forward to what will come of that. I'm looking forward to removing barriers for employees — like changing it to direct bill as opposed to tuition reimbursement. Employees often don't have the upfront money to pay for tuition and then get reimbursed later. Institutions should work out a direct bill with employers.

Sims: Many of our students are working while seeking their degrees. We're looking to add stackable credentials. For example, we have nursing students who may want to become pharmacists or certified nursing assistants. Earning these short credentials empowers them to work while they're working on their education. We also want to make sure we're developing apprenticeships so students can earn while they're learning.

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