The Faculty Senate Planning and Budget Committee has endorsed this proposal. It will be next be considered by the Council of Deans.

Reshaping Proposal

Complete to Compete: Adult Learners at Wichita State University

Wichita State University’s enrollment plans are conditioned by its urban serving mission. Not only is it important to attract the region’s most academically talented students, but access to higher education for all segments of the population must remain a priority as well. Yet, as is clear from demographic projections and higher education enrollment trends, the recruiting environment has changed significantly in the past decade. Within the state and the nation at large, the number of high school graduates is declining and adult learners are the “fastest-growing student segment in higher education [one that] has consistently increased during the last three decades.” Whereas only 16% of college students fit the traditional model (18-22 year olds), more than 47% of students currently enrolled in U.S. colleges and universities are over age 25 (STAMATS Webinar on Adult Learners, 2/08).

While Wichita State University’s student body includes many adult learners, WSU is one of the few higher education entities in the Wichita MSA that does not provide targeted educational degree programs for adult learners. One reason for this absence is that the educational needs and requirements of adult students differ markedly from those of traditional students. There is also the perception that “degree completion” programs are academically inferior. Given, however, our high quality academic programs, urban serving mission and affordable tuition, Wichita State University can effectively compete in the local higher education environment and, in the process, serve the educational needs of adults in the community who want to return to college and complete their college degree. To do so will require us to address the unique pedagogical needs of adult learners and the academic structures that allow them to succeed.

The research on adult learners states clearly that universities entering into this educational arena must understand the difference between programs that meet the needs of returning adult students versus pedagogical structures designed for traditional students. This situation, however, does not invariably lead to an “either or situation” but can be seen as a multiplicity of ways to meet the needs of different students. According to Husson & Kennedy (2003) the critical elements for successful adult learner programming are:

- Learner-focused, market-sensitive approach;
- Courses and programs designed specifically for adult learners;
- High quality and readily accessible programs;
- Multiple delivery options;
Excellent customer service.
The authors make it clear that to accommodate the needs of adult learners, academic programs need to move from being course focused to degree focused. They also need to offer time-compressed courses and programs to accommodate adult learners who are familiar with corporate fast-track training programs. These requirements are not at odds with efforts to serve our traditional student body. In fact, they can be seen as complementary.

To meet the educational needs and aspirations of adult learners in the Wichita MSA who would like to earn a degree from WSU, the following plans are underway:

1) Beginning fall, 2010, implement strategic degree completion programs that can be taught and supported as a pilot before adding other options.
   a. The initial degree program will be with Criminal Justice.
   b. Additional options built on the General Studies Degree program will follow.
2) The primary location or home base for WSU’s adult learner programs will be the satellite campuses, and the program will be coordinated by Dr. Susan Norton, Director of Satellite Campuses and Workforce Development.
   a. The rationale for this is twofold:
      1. Adult learners’ re-entry into the higher education environment is facilitated by a “one-stop” venue for all services.
      2. Dr. Norton has extensive professional and educational expertise with adult learners.
3) Initial recruitment efforts will focus on identifying the student population that has left the university in the last five years who have completed at least 2 years of coursework without having graduated.
4) Promoting the program will require clear and concise marketing materials on the degree completion offerings as well as materials explaining access to support systems and opportunities at the University.
5) Teaching adult learners will require professional development opportunities about adult education theory for faculty who opt to work with adult learners.
   a. Collaboration with Dr. Cheryl Polson, assistant dean of the graduate school, Kansas State University, would be a possibility.
   b. Dr. Polson is a well respected author and educator in the adult education community with decades of experience teaching adults and helping faculty understand the difference between teaching traditional and non-traditional students.

Once the pilot programs are operational, the following longer-term issues need to be addressed:
1) Work with Campus Life and University Relations to establish enrollment goals for WSU’s adult learner programs and provide the necessary institutional support to facilitate the academic success of adult learners.

2) Establish scholarships specific to the returning adult population.

3) Develop plans to expand online learning sections of general education classes and requirements to support adult learner programs.