

Guided Leadership in Adult Higher Education: Using Distributive Leadership Theory to Compare University Websites with the Principles Recommended by the Council of Adult and Experiential Learning

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Abstract

Adult learners tend to be serious students who are motivated to succeed in their programs of study. Barriers that interfere with adult-learner progress will likely be external, identifiable, and very specific, yet traditional structures of higher education do not identify and accommodate their needs. The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning 360 identified ten principles that assist the success of adult learner populations. Knowing that a positive and helpful virtual presence on the World Wide Web is necessary for institutional survival, we designed this study to identify the presence of CAEL Principles found on nine university websites, and we assessed those levels using Distributive Leadership Theory. Results show that each institution offered some sort of guided pathway for adult learners, but none of the nine websites adhered to all ten CAEL Principles.

Keywords: CAEL, Adult Learner Success, Distributive Leadership, Website Analysis

Section 1: Review of Literature and Trends:

Recent figures from the National Center for Educational Statistics projects a 14 percent adult learner enrollment increase in degree-granting postsecondary institutions by 2024 (NCES, 2016). With adult learner populations increasing, institutional survival is dependent upon continued service and commitment to this population (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Seidman, 2005; NAICU, 2016; Cortez, 2018). With over 85% of higher education enrollment identified as adult learners, it is important to review andragogic principles that include adult learner characteristics and needs, as well as identify adult learner barriers and persistence trends (Alhassan, 2012; CAEL 2017). Studies of enrollment needs have been around for decades, but shifting demographics have increased the importance of adult learners as a specific group. For instance, as far back as 1980, educators began to recognize the growing importance of adult education as separate from pedagogy, and adult-learner theory focused on the art and science of adult learning with a name: andragogy (Knowles, 1980).

There are five adult learner assumptions that Knowles identifies as important for an adult learner: self-concept, experience, readiness to learn, orientation to learning, and motivation to learn. A few years after that, Peters (1988) suggested that universities should design life-beyond-the-classroom activities that accommodate adult learners rather than requiring adult learners to accommodate the universities' activities. Change has been slow. Considering the imbedded culture of traditionally aged college students in universities, the decision to assess and potentially adjust policy to align with the needs of adult learners may be a challenge for administrators (Sin, 2014; Hodara, Martinez-Wenzl, Stevens, Maseo, 2017). Very few public institutions have specific and assertive adult-learner policies, procedures, or practices (Parkay & Kilgore, 2014). According to Finch (2016), higher education policies continue to serve traditional students (full-time, first-time, and ages 18-22).

Our review of decades-long literature patterns shows that an early conceptual model of serving adult learners evolved out of traditional student models; therefore, we conducted current research using website resources that were not available in the 1980's. Interestingly, our juxtaposition of CAEL 360 principles with university websites still shows gaps in services because traditional-student models do not identify or address adult learner characteristics and needs assertively. Since the trend in enrollment is that more adults are looking at higher education as a way to re-enforce job security, enhance skill sets and marketable credentials, and potentially increase future income, it would appear that the gap between adult-student needs would be narrowing over time, not sustaining (Ritt, 2008; Stevens, 2014). The traditional structure of higher education institutions continues to pose challenges for adult learner success (Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012).

According to Knowles (1980), adult learners think about, evaluate, or perceive themselves as self-directed. Adult learners see themselves as autonomous, independent, and self-disciplined. Similarly, Stevens (2014) conducted a longitudinal study that focused on adult learner perceptions, attitudes, and preferences for higher education experiences and reported that adult learners prefer to take charge of their own discovery and take responsibility for their own pathways. Feeding this perception is the resolute returning-student attitude that many adult learners feel because they have already been involved in a failed attempt at post-secondary education (Chao, DeRocco, & Flynn, 2007; Deggs, 2011; National Student Clearinghouse, 2014). Returning adult learners who have experienced a dropout from higher education are in no mood for complications or delays. Likewise, adult learners regularly have uncompromising loyalties outside of their coursework: 58% have jobs while attending college and 26% are raising a family (National Student Clearinghouse, 2014; CAEL 2017). In addition, adult learners usually bring into college some type of work and life experiences as well, which may make them see themselves as having a more advanced standing than their traditionally aged counterparts (Marriam & Caffarella, 1999; Alhassan, 2012).

Social and academic integration is important for adult students to have a feeling of connectedness, which in turn leads to a commitment to the university, but it is not the same as for traditionally aged students (Alhassan, 2012; Tinto, 2012). The more any student is vested in his or her collegiate experience, the higher the chance the student will persist through graduation (Tinto, 2012), but with adult learners, that process is a little different because it requires balance between too little communication and too much interaction. Adult learners may be accomplished enough that too much interaction may seem controlling, and given the demands on adult's lives with family and work commitments, inflexible activities may seem insensitive. That said, building relationships and providing experiences nevertheless create a sense of belonging and support (Tinto, 2007). It is imperative that universities understand the adult learner population and meet the social and psychological needs of adult learners in their real lives (Alhassan, 2012; Martin & Sheckly, 2000; Sandler, 2000).

Clearly, adult learners have strengths, motivations, needs, and challenges that differ from traditionally aged students (Stevens, 2014). Considering the intrinsic nature of adult-student goals, it is a mistake to approach adult learners with a proposal based on school spirit and institutional pride, esteem, or image. Tinto (2012) states that a student's individual commitment can be broken down into two categories: goal commitment and institutional commitment. Tinto describes goal commitment as a student's internal aspirations and hopes, and describes institutional commitment as the fondness a student feels toward the university and the desire to be associated with that specific institution (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Tinto, 2012). Our triangulation of literature shows that institutional commitment is less important to adult learners than to traditionally aged students, so approaching an adult-learner with a process of reentry based on school spirit may be outside of an adult-learner's intrinsic goals.

In fact, our anecdotal, on-the-job observations lead us to speculate that the higher the profile of the institution, the more the student body may feel cliquish to returning adult students and lead them to perceive that association with the clique is an act of disloyalty to their ongoing commitments like family, church, and jobs.

This observation is outside the scope of our research, but it deserves further study in a separate effort. Our review of literature and our career experience does indeed reveal that adult students want and need a sense of community in their studies, but the interaction is likely to be goal-related and purposeful first, and social after that. Empty-Vessel paradigms toward students in general aren't receiving much approval these days, and assuming that adult learners are void and needing to be filled is most certainly a failed approach. Adjusting our leadership lens to attend to the needs of adult learners is no small concern, and institutions that casually lump adult students into general categories with traditionally aged students will soon come to regret this practice.

Section 2: Purpose of the Study

Wanting to sample the current environment regarding how universities use their websites to communicate services targeting adult-student needs, the purpose of this study is to measure the presence of adult-learner policies, procedures, and programs on university websites to determine their degree of correlation with the ten Council of Adult and Experiential Learning 360 Principles for serving adult learners (CAEL, 2017). The ten CAEL 360 principles are adaptively, assessment of learning outcomes, financing, life and career planning, outreach, technology, strategic partnerships, student support systems, teaching-learning process, and transitions.

Section 2.1: Data Collection

Data collection occurred by reviewing the websites of nine universities in the United States. All nine institutions are accredited through the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges. Data were collected by researching each university's website using search terms such as adult learner, adult admissions, readmission, online learners, non-traditional learners, mentors, as well as all ten adult-learner principles. Principles were viewed through a lens of Distributed Leadership Theory with the belief that by utilizing a Distributed Leadership lens, implementing CAEL Principles will help build an environment of shared purpose, social support, and a voice for leadership serving Adult Learners.

Section 2.2: Presentation of Data

Data were coded to identify themes and patterns of implementation of the CAEL Principles by assessing the existence, reoccurrence, and communication of each of the ten CAEL Principles on websites. If a Principle appeared on the website of a university, an "X" was placed in the performance column for that institution relating to that Principle. If there were multiple policies or programs that met any given CAEL Principle, a number indicating the frequency of occurrences accompanied the "X". The number of occurrences of each CAEL Principle on a university's website and the completeness of their discussion determined our assessment of the university's achievements regarding that Principle. Codes were then placed on a grid.

Using that grid, each university's use of the ten CAEL Principles was rated according to concepts of Distributive Leadership Theory on a scale of 0 to 3, with "0" meaning no occurrence of that principle on that university's website; "1" signifying a beginning implementation, "2" signifying a developing implementation, and a "3" signifying an accomplished implementation. Those ratings appear on Table 1 showing the correlation of CAEL 360 Principles and the effectiveness with which they appear on each university's website as assessed through a lens of Distributive Leadership Theory.

Table 1: Overview of CAEL Principles Matched to Each Institution

	Adaptivity	Assessment	Finance	Life & Career	Outreach	Technology	Partners	Student Support	Teacher Learner	Transitions
University #1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
University #2	2	0	1	0	0	1	1	0	0	3
University #3	1	1	1	1	0	1	0	1	0	3
University #4	3	0	1	2	0	1	1	2	1	3
University #5	2	3	3	1	1	3	1	1	1	1
University #6	0	0	1	1	0	2	0	0	0	1
University #7	1	2	1	1	0	3	0	2	1	3
University #8	2	1	2	2	1	2	1	1	0	1
University #9	2	2	0	1	1	1	1	1	0	3

The numbers indicated in the table denote each university’s level of involvement associated with the tenCAEL Principles as found on university websites: 0 means no evidence found for that CAEL Principle on that university’s website, 1 means beginning evidence found, 2 means developing evidence found, and 3 means accomplished evidence found. Adapted from *CAEL: Adult Learner 360: Catalyst for success.* (2017). Retrieved from Council for Adult and Experiential Learning website: https://cdn2.hubspot.net/hubfs/617695/Adult_Learner_360_Report_Sample_BN3-17-18.pdf?submissionGuid=ca57189f-12ad-4de3-bfb2-cba9feca1e4e

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