

# Challenging Conventional Wisdom: Building an Adult-Centered Degree Completion Program at a Traditional University's Satellite Campus

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## Abstract

*This essay will discuss the creation of adult-learner degree programs at Wichita State University's satellite campuses with a particular focus on how such programs complement the mission of a traditional urban-serving research institution. It will assess the decision-making process that led to the transformation of satellite campuses into adult-learner centers and evaluate how the adult-learner degree completion programs were marketed to both internal and external audiences.*

Founded in 1886 as Fairmount College, Wichita State University (WSU) has grown from a small church affiliated college to a state university with more than 14,000 students. Throughout its history, the university has enjoyed a close and collaborative partnership with the city of Wichita and the surrounding metropolitan area, with a particular emphasis on serving students whose financial and family responsibilities have limited their options for higher education.

Beginning in the mid-1990s, WSU established a number of satellite centers to increase access to individuals whose schedules and locations made it difficult for them to attend courses on the main campuses by offering an array of introductory and general education courses. Over time, the centers evolved into two campuses whose mission remained relatively static until recently. A desire to expand the mission of the satellite campuses to include degree programs has been the catalyst to restructure the university's satellite campuses from a traditionally supporting role to a nontraditional adult-learner model. This essay will discuss the creation of adult-learner degree programs at WSU's satellite campuses with a particular focus on how such programs complement the mission of a traditional urban-serving research institution.

The essay will begin by assessing the decision-making process that led to the transformation of the satellite campuses into adult-learner centers. Given that the satellite campuses had produced net revenues from the moment that they opened their doors, the primary impetus to transform their mission was not monetary. Rather, it was a desire to meet the higher educational aspirations of adults whose lives had prevented them from completing college degrees. The decision to create adult-learner degree completion programs at a traditional state university and the ability to move forward presented formidable obstacles. This essay will then shed light on the programmatic and cultural differences between traditional and nontraditional students, and it will

examine how administrators at WSU were able to effectively argue to campus faculty that such differences were complementary as opposed to being mutually exclusive. By focusing on program planning, the authors will discuss the steps necessary to make such a transition and the need to incorporate adult-learning methodology into degree programs in order to enhance the odds of success.

The third segment of this essay will evaluate how adult-learner degree completion programs were marketed to both internal and external audiences. The former, a faculty centric phase, was needed to achieve the buy-in and support from the university community without which the programs could not get off the ground. The latter, a student centric phase, was critical to garner the support of the metropolitan community served by Wichita State University.

The essay will close with a detailed analysis of the program's initial year, which includes a look at the methodology's employed for program assessment and how these results will feed into discussions about the program's future.

## **Refining the Mission of the Satellites**

When Wichita State University (WSU) opened a series of satellite campuses in the mid-1990s, they were designed to bolster enrollment. Having peaked in 1988, enrollment at WSU dropped steadily throughout the next decade, and the creation of satellite locations was seen as a way to counter the downward trend. Although admissions requirements remained largely stable throughout the period, the expansion of Ph.D. programs in the late 1980s, coupled with the hiring of faculty with stronger research credentials, created an environment that put greater emphasis on traditional students. The resulting loss of nontraditional, part-time students, contributed to a problematic enrollment decline and efforts to reverse the trend focused on recapturing what had once been a significant component of the WSU student population.

When Eugene M. Hughes took office as president in 1993, he began a campaign for *The Metropolitan Advantage* that was intended to redefine WSU's connection to the community. President Hughes quickly opened off-campus centers and challenged the faculty to adopt the idea of role redefinition. According to Hughes, "Universities are never finished products, and urban institutions like WSU must evolve in response to the changes in the community" (WSU Special Collections 2010, see Hughes.). WSU's three off-campus centers were intended to reach out to the area's nontraditional students by providing an environment more akin to a community college than a research institution. Given the plethora of higher education institutions that had established satellite facilities in Wichita to compete with WSU for students, university administrators hoped to attract students with a combination of convenient parking and high demand general education courses. While not all three locations proved successful, the new satellite facility in west Wichita began to pay quick dividends. During its first full year in operation, the west campus generated almost 7,000 credit hours, a number that increased significantly each year thereafter until 2006 when the location produced a little more than 18,000 credit hours. From thereon out,

enrollments began to decline, a situation that provided one of the stimuli that prompted a reassessment of the campus's operations and academic mission.

A second stimulus was President Donald Beggs's decision to open a satellite facility in south Wichita. Whereas Wichita State University had previously offered courses in south Wichita in partnership with a local community college, the president now envisioned an independent facility operated exclusively by WSU. Such a facility was seen as appropriate for the university's mission to offer higher educational opportunities to the residents of Wichita and the rural environs that border it to the south. A site for the south campus was secured in spring 2007 and the new facility opened the following January. Unlike the west campus that offered a range of general education courses, planning for the south campus sought to identify and offer high-demand academic programs in the new facility. The first to take up residence at the site was a newly created accelerated nursing program, which brought a full-fledged degree program that served many second career students. Shortly thereafter, a master's level education program was offered at the campus, along with a traditional mix of general education courses. The decision to offer a mix of degree programs and general education courses can be attributed, in part, to new administrative personnel who were responsible for overseeing the operation of the university's satellite campuses. This development coincided with the decision to open the south campus and contributed the third and final stimulus for refining the mission of WSU's satellite campuses.

When President Hughes and his administrative staff opened the satellite campuses in the mid-1990s, they did not allocate significant resources to the enterprise. The goal, as seen in retrospect, was to open the doors with minimal investment, covering only the essential operational costs. This meant that beyond paying for rent, utilities, and a skeleton staff, no budget was established for instruction. For the first decade of its existence, courses at the satellite campuses were seen as part of the normal-teaching load for departments and faculty, and scheduling courses at the west campus was dependent upon the cooperation and support of department and college personnel. With no budget for instruction, it proved nearly impossible to plan strategically for the campus's academic mission. During the planning sessions for opening the south campus, the new administrative team insisted that the campus have an independent budget for instruction that would allow the site director to work in partnership with desired departments to recruit academic programs and specific courses that supported its academic mission. With a modest budget for instruction, the director and her staff effectively scheduled a mixture of courses that resonated with the local population. From the moment that the south campus opened, it generated net revenues and, in so doing, demonstrated the need for satellite campuses to have their own instructional budgets.

When enrollment at the west campus began to decline in 2007, the new administrative team lobbied extensively to establish an instructional budget that would support efforts to redefine the academic mission of the university's oldest satellite campus. Although these efforts coincided precisely with the economic downturn that was gripping the nation, a modest instructional budget was established for the 2008–09 academic year. Much like the situation at the south campus, having resources available for instruction

allowed the administrative staff at the west campus to partner with academic departments to begin altering the mix of courses offered. When the decision was made to fund the instructional budget at a level that would support all courses offered at the facility, it provided an opportunity to radically reconsider the academic profile and mission of the west campus. Rather than depend on academic departments to schedule a smattering of courses that were convenient for them to do so, the facility's administrative staff could determine what courses and programs best suited the west-side location. It was within this context that discussions about starting a degree completion program for adults progressed.

Since the time that the west campus first opened its doors in 1995, a number of private colleges and universities within the Wichita metropolitan area had competed aggressively for the adult-student market. In spite of the fact that WSU had worked effectively to recruit and serve nontraditional students, it did not participate in the adult-learner market per se. Once recruited to campus, nontraditional students participated in the standard academic programs. With the onset of enrollment decline at the west campus, discussions about its academic programs soon turned to creating a program for returning adult students. Doing so would build on the university's strong academic programs, affordable tuition, and name recognition as the area's leading higher education institution, and it would take advantage of one of the area's fastest growing student populations. Creating an adult-learner degree completion program at WSU, however, would have to overcome significant faculty and staff biases against such programs. These efforts occupied a considerable amount of the authors' time during the 2009–10 academic year and they are the focus of the following section.

## **Responding to Internal Concerns and Questions**

Given the long-standing bias toward traditional students at Wichita State University, most faculty members were not familiar with the significant pedagogical differences between traditional and adult educational programs. In addition, WSU faculty had voiced concerns about maintaining the academic integrity of the degree programs, as there was a perception on campus that degree completion programs were academically inferior. Since implementing a successful program would require the buy-in of the faculty, an internal-marketing plan was developed to introduce faculty to the needs associated with adult degree completion programs.

For these reasons, discussions with the academic deans, department chairs, and participating faculty were scheduled as an important first step in building the adult-learner program. During these meetings, the pedagogical foundations of adult education became a focal point of discussions. At its essence, the early field of adult education sought to articulate the needs of adult learners in all formal and informal educational opportunities and flesh out the educational interventions necessary to help adults. Not surprisingly, these were understood to be significantly different than the commonly accepted pedagogical practices of the day that focused on traditional aged college students. The term andragogy was originally coined by Knowles (1980, 43) to describe “the art and science of helping adults learn,” and as the field developed

Merriam and Caffarella (1999, 272) presented the following five assumptions about adult learners that further defined andragogy:

1. As a person matures, his or her self-concept moves from that of a dependent personality toward one of a self-directing human being.
2. An adult accumulates a growing reservoir of experience, which is a rich resource for learning.
3. The readiness of an adult to learn is closely related to the developmental tasks of his or her social role.
4. There is a change in time perspective as people mature—from future application of knowledge to immediacy of application. Thus, an adult is more problem centered than subject centered in learning.
5. Adults are motivated to learn by internal factors rather than external ones.

These principles became the basis for the adult learner-program at WSU. Not only were they helpful in introducing our faculty to the pedagogical needs of adult learners, these attributes succinctly defined the learning styles of students who had stopped out of their studies before completing a degree, the segment of the adult-learner market that would become our primary recruits.

Initially the plan was met with some skepticism. The proliferation of private and for-profit colleges that had produced graduates who were ill-prepared to continue studies at WSU had left the faculty with assumptions about adult education and adult degree completion programs that had to be addressed. Our discussions with the faculty emphasized that the degrees were the same as those on the main campus: the curriculum was identical, and courses would be taught by faculty hired by the departments' choosing. The only difference was that classes would be offered in a condensed time frame to meet the needs of the adult-returning student. Paramount to this discussion was how the university would help meet the needs of the influx of returning adults to the university due to the effects of the recession and, in particular, the high number of laid off workers in the local aviation industry. Unemployment was running at double digit figures for the first time in decades, with many adults returning to update skills and enhance their marketability in the workforce. These conversations enabled us to show faculty how these programs could help our students update skills and improve their lives.

Discussions with faculty and university administrators also focused on the complementary nature of the adult-learner program. Having worked tirelessly for more than a decade to market Wichita State University as a traditional campus, it was essential to pitch the adult-learner initiative as a complement to recruiting high school seniors and community college transfers. With limited capacity in the dormitories and no football program, it was particularly challenging to convince local high school seniors that they could fully engage in college life at WSU. By housing the program at the west campus and creating a separate marketing campaign for the adult-learner initiative, we were able to assuage concerns about undermining the efforts to market Wichita State University to high school graduates as a place where one could engage

in a traditional campus experience. By the end of November 2009, we had secured the faculty and administrative support necessary to begin developing the program.

## Reaching New Student Markets

As discussed above, the decision had been made to house the new program for adult learners at WSU's west campus. Not only was this campus located in one of the fastest-growing parts of the university's service area, we were confident that adult learners would benefit from its more intimate setting. Additionally, the west campus is located between the state police training center and the training center for local, city, and county law enforcement, a situation that dovetailed nicely with the fact that criminal justice was one of the programs planned for the initial cohort. Finally, given that the main campus's recruitment and marketing strategies were geared to the traditional aged student, housing the adult-learner program at the West Campus avoided mission confusion.

Given that Wichita State University is governed by the Kansas Board of Regents and accredited by the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association (HLC-NCA), the degree completion programs needed to be consistent with the standards for adult degree completion programs established by the NCA. These principles (Appendix A) provided guidance in programming the degree programs for the adult-student population. With the curriculum already in place, the primary challenge was to make the course offerings accessible to adults returning to the university. This was accomplished by establishing a single cohort that was programmed from the time a student entered the program to graduation. Although students could work with their departmental advisors to substitute other options, a blocked schedule assured that students would have access to courses necessary to complete their degree programs. Courses were offered in eight-week sessions and blocked so that students attended classes twice weekly. This schedule assured students who wished to return full time to the university that they could take twelve hours per semester and, in so doing, qualify for full-time financial aid options.

As we began developing marketing plans for the program, we turned to the professionals to help narrow our targeted audience. Most scholarly literature prior to 1990 lumped nonreturning students into a single population. Since the early 1990s, however, educational researchers have discovered that a more accurate picture of the issues surrounding student retention required identifying the distinctive subgroups of nonreturners. Hoyt and Winn (2004, 395–417) offered the following categories:

**Drop-outs:** Students who enroll, do not reenroll, and do not complete their degree program or selected courses.

**Stop-outs:** Students who do not complete the selected plan of study within the continuous academic scheduling. Many will skip a semester or more before returning to school.

**Opt-outs:** Students who leave college because they have accomplished what they intended to do. This may be before a degree or certificate has been achieved.

**Transfer-outs:** Students who begin their college career at one institution and transfer to another institution to accomplish their degrees or certificates.

In our opinion, the opt-out and transfer-out students would be less motivated to return to the university than both the drop-out and stop-out students. With this in mind, our task was to convert the drop-out population to stop-outs and to reenroll as many stop-out students as possible. Since no marketing had ever been developed to reengage these cohorts of former WSU students, the adult-learner initiative could begin by repackaging existing degrees in ways that would appeal to former students who sought to complete their college degree. The advantage of this approach is that we opted to reengage students who had prior experience at our University by offering them fully articulated degree programs in a format that could work within their current family and professional lives.

The marketing plan for the launch of the program was designed to attract stop-out students to return to the university and to bring awareness to the local community that WSU was entering the market with an adult degree completion program that was convenient, accessible, and geared for the working adult. The most effective means to reach the stop-out students was to mine university data. In conjunction with the Office of Institutional Research, we identified students that had not been enrolled at the university for at least two semesters and met the following criteria: they had completed a minimum of forty-five hours toward a degree, their home residence was within a fifty-mile radius of the main campus, and their last date of attendance was within the past ten years. The names on this list were sent to the national clearinghouse to identify students who had actually transferred to another institution to finish their degree. This effort produced approximately 9,000 potential stop-out students for a direct mail campaign.

The direct mail campaign was launched at the end of March 2010 with a letter from the provost announcing the program and the opportunity for each student to return to the university to finish his/her degree. The initial mailing was also used as a way of checking the mailing list for accuracy as well as a way of piquing the interest of the potential student to the program. The second piece of the campaign was a postcard with the program name, degrees offered, and contact information. Within twenty-four hours after the postcards were sent, students began contacting us for additional information and to reserve seats at the already scheduled informational sessions.

While the direct mail campaign was getting underway, the university's marketing division also developed a look for the program that was both recognizable as part of the Wichita State University community but also as an entity with its own direction and emphasis. Discussions with the marketing staff centered on the need to create a complementary identity for the adult-learner initiative. The result was naming the program Wichita State University Complete in order to convey to the student that the program offered a means to finish the degree they had started. The marketing materials were geared to generate inquiries to an informational website where interested students

could sign up to attend on-site informational meetings. The emphasis on the website reduced the number of redundant phone calls through the use of a robust FAQs page that was updated often and allowed the small number of staff to work directly with students who had questions outside of the norm. Use of the web also signaled to prospective students that being web literate would be necessary to participate in the program.

The information sessions were held in the evenings and on Saturday mornings to accommodate the schedules of working adults. The main emphases of these sessions were to answer basic questions about the four degree offerings, to work with students who may have already been in the process of being admitted or readmitted to the university, and to help undecided students commit to resuming their university studies. The sessions began with a short program describing the realities of being a returning adult student, followed by breakout sessions grouped by a planned program of study at which participants could work directly with program advisers. The smaller workgroups helped alleviate fears and convey to the individuals in attendance that returning to the university was actually something that they could accomplish. A secondary objective was to help the students become familiar with the individuals who were in place to assist their return to the university as well as to supply continued support as they moved through their academic program. At each information session, scholarships were awarded by means of a drawing, and students were informed that everyone who enrolled in a WSU Complete program would be given a laptop computer. All told, there were six information sessions scheduled between April and July.

Although the major thrust of the marketing campaign was the direct mail to stop-out students, a small percentage of the budget was used for print media. Ads were placed in the local newspaper and business journal, and billboards were placed at strategic intersections around the Wichita area. While the additional print media was useful in raising the awareness to the public at large, postinformation session evaluations overwhelmingly pointed to the direct mail materials as the method by which attendees remembered hearing about the program. As the information sessions progressed, word of mouth referrals increased as well. To date, the marketing campaign generated more than 350 responses, and almost 100 people have attended an information session, 43 of whom have returned to the university for the 2010 fall semester. Interestingly, some of these students turned out to be better suited for programs other than those offered through WSU Complete.

The reasons that these individuals returned to the university were quite varied. Many stated that the economic downturn prompted them to come back. Others wrote that they had intended to finish their degree for a long time and that the mailings provided an effective catalyst. A few students indicated that they had been waiting for WSU to enter the adult degree completion market to finish their degree. For many of the returnees, evening courses in a condensed time frame coupled with the relatively affordable tuition of a public university solidified their choice.

## **Future Plans – Growth and Improvement**

Now that the 2010 fall semester is underway and our first cohort of adult learners is enrolled, we have already turned our thoughts to the future. First and foremost in our minds is the need to nurture the current students and grow the program. Regardless of how the marketing campaign is tweaked to attract more interest, the most effective recruiting tool is word-of-mouth advertising that comes from satisfied students. Toward this end, we have already allocated a .5 FTE position to monitor the progress of currently enrolled students and help head off potential pitfalls before they occur. We have also worked closely with the registrar's office and Institutional Research to properly code the WSU Complete students in order to track student progress and, eventually, provide the raw data necessary for program analysis.

Expanding the class size can be accomplished, in part, by improving the yield on students who attend the information sessions. We learned from the postsession evaluation materials that the information sessions can be improved with the addition of on-site academic advising. It turns out that by being intently focused on admitting students to the university, we underestimated the desire for on-demand advising. The goal will be to create a true one-stop information session that allows prospective students to learn about the program, apply to the university, and receive initial academic advising. Students with complex or difficult academic issues would be scheduled for additional advising, but the majority of attendees should be able to get their basic advising needs met within the context of a reformulated information session. This, we feel, will increase our yield of prospective students who attend information sessions.

Our interaction with students at the information sessions also revealed to us the need to expand our program offerings in two ways. First, it is clear that a large number of potential adult learners are not ready to enter into a degree program cohort designed for students who have already completed sixty credit hours of course work. To meet this need, we intend to create a complementary program to Finish WSU Complete that provides a streamlined mechanism for completing the first two years of university coursework. The goal is to have this in place by fall 2011. Second, and related to the first issue, there is a need to increase the number of courses available online. Growing the number of online courses has been a university priority for the past two years, and we have been in close communication with the individuals responsible for this initiative to ensure that the adult-learner programs are fully supported.

As we move past the initial cohort groups, it is critical that the program continue to be fully supported by the central administration. The initial offering of the WSU Complete program has proven that adult degree completion programs are fully consonant with the academic mission of Wichita State University, an urban-serving research university. The program's early success at attracting qualified, interested students demonstrates that such a program can be offered within the current academic framework without compromising quality. Moreover, these programs can actually help

departments retain students who would otherwise be forced to drop-out or stop-out. These factors will be important information to share with faculty and administrators as additional cohort groups are added to the mix.

A key element of the program's success, both current and future, is to continue the funding mechanism for instruction that gives full control of these resources to the WSU Complete program. A fully funded instructional budget for the program to support salaries and travel stipends provided critical incentives for department chairs and academic deans to participate in the program. Given the unlikely scenario that the university will receive additional appropriations from the state anytime soon, there will be intense scrutiny of all budgets to maximize efficiencies and maintain university priorities. A fledgling program such as WSU Complete could be in jeopardy of having its funding reduced if it is not able to show immediate and consistent results in terms of student participation. To date, the initial investment seems to have paid off in that the marketing efforts yielded forty-students students for the 2010 fall semester.

To reach its full potential, the WSU Complete program will need to continually refine its marketing campaign to engage the drop-out and stop-out populations and increase awareness about WSU's adult degree completion program within the Wichita metropolitan area. Both the early initiative for students who have yet to complete sixty credit hours and the increased availability of online courses will be key components of the next marketing phase.

Beyond marketing the program to expand student participation, professional development sessions for faculty that focus on adult learners will be offered in the coming year. As WSU faculty increasingly interact with returning adults in their classrooms, they will benefit from knowing more about the educational needs, learning styles, and motivation of adult learners. While many faculty are familiar with experiential learning through the inclusion of cooperative education in their degree programs, the plan is to provide opportunities for faculty to learn how incorporating such pedagogy into their classrooms can help keep their curriculum relevant and vibrant to both the traditional and returning student populations.

Finally, continued follow-up, assessment, and student feedback will be the program's bedrock. As indicated previously, initial assessments identified the need for on-site advising within the information sessions. Our plan to track students via the student enrollment module and use it to maintain periodic contact with students will enable WSU professional staff to practice intrusive advising and proactively promote academic success. The goal is to keep the stop-out population from repeating their decision to leave and, in so doing, fulfill the mission of Wichita State University to provide quality educational opportunities for the residents of South Central Kansas.

# **Appendix A: Principles of Good Practice in Adult Degree Completion Programs to be Observed by NCA Institutions and Reviewed for Patterns of Evidence by Consultant-Evaluators**

## **Mission**

The *adult degree completion programs* are consistent with and integral to the institution's mission.

## **Resources**

Faculty members share a commitment to serve adult learners, bring appropriate credentials to their work assignments, and participate in determining policies that govern *adult degree completion programs*.

Full-time and part-time faculty members who work in *adult degree completion programs* participate in professional development activities that focus on the needs of adult learners.

The institution provides an adequate organizational structure, administrative support, and financial resources to ensure the effectiveness of *adult degree completion programs*.

Adequate institutional resources are committed to the *adult degree completion programs* to ensure quality and appropriate student services.

The institution provides timely and adequate access to the range of student services—including admissions, financial aid, academic advising, delivery of course materials, and counseling and placement services—needed to ensure academic success.

The institution ensures access to learning resources, technology, and facilities to support its *adult degree completion programs*.

## **Educational Programs and Other Services**

The *adult degree completion programs* that the institution offers are in subject areas that are consistent with the institution's mission.

The *adult degree completion programs* have clearly stated requirements and outcomes in the areas of major and general education.

*Adult degree completion programs* and courses that are offered in distance delivery modalities are consistent with the *Guidelines for Distance Education*, published by the NCA Commission on Institutions of Higher Education.

The assessment of student learning outcomes is a standard practice in all *adult degree completion programs* and is linked to program improvement.

The institution uses a variety of acceptable methodologies (e.g., examinations in subject areas; assessment of prior learning using principles advocated by organizations such as the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning [CAEL], the American Council on Education [ACE], the Adult Higher Education Alliance, and the Middle States Commission on Higher Education [MSA/CHE]); and its trained faculty using and applying these methods.

Multiple measures (portfolio assessment; capstone courses; oral examinations; juried examinations; standardized national exams; locally developed tests; performance on licensure, certification or professional exams) are used to assess the learning outcomes of students enrolled in *adult degree completion programs*.

*Adult degree completion programs* address students' education and career goals at the time of reentry and throughout the degree completion process in order to assess the learning they will need and to help them reach their goals.

## **Planning**

Consideration of *adult degree completion programs* is integrated into the institution's planning and evaluation processes in order to ensure continuous improvement in the offerings.

## **Integrity**

The institution has processes in place to ensure that the *adult degree completion programs* it sponsors are offered with integrity and are responsive to learners and the community.

The institution that partners with another organization to deliver an *adult degree completion program* is knowledgeable of the "Good Practices in Contractual Arrangements Involving Courses and Programs," published by the NCA Commission on Institutions of Higher Education, and uses this document as a guide to ensure the integrity of its program.

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