university of maine at augusta

## Executive Summary and Full Report: Adult Learner 360

### Fall 2019

#### Executive Summary

The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) is pleased to present the results of your *Adult Learner 360* assessment.

During the autumn term of the 2019-20 academic year, 671 adult students at University of Maine at Augusta (UM-Augusta) participated in the *Adult Learner 360* Adult Learner Satisfaction Questionnaire (ALSQ), which measures their perceptions of the University’s adult student-oriented programs and services. Concurrently, 72 institutional respondents completed the *Adult Learner 360* Institutional Effectiveness Assessment (IEA), which measures the quality and effectiveness of the University’s adult student-oriented programs and services. The combination of these two questionnaires constitutes the *Adult Learner 360* Toolkit.

The surveys are based on CAEL’s Ten Principles for Effectively Serving Adults. These Principles are:

1. Adaptivity
2. Assessment of Learning Outcomes
3. Financing
4. Life & Career Planning
5. Outreach
6. Strategic Partnerships
7. Student Support Systems
8. Teaching-Learning Process
9. Technology
10. Transitions

CAEL documents the aggregated data from both questionnaires, pairing them to identify strengths, challenges, and disconnects between the University and its adult students. This report offers recommendations for next steps to assist your institution with strategic planning efforts.

UM-Augusta’s assessment results reveal strong agreement between the two respondent sets. Areas of high adult student satisfaction and institutional effectiveness are considered strengths; areas of low adult student satisfaction and institutional effectiveness are considered challenges.

Both sets of respondents consider the **Teaching-Learning Process, Student Support Systems, Technology,** and **Outreach** Principles to be strengths. The **Financing, Strategic Partnerships,** and **Life & Career Planning** Principles emerge as challenges for the University. One Principle emerged as a disconnect, receiving discrepant evaluations from the two respondent sets.

To prioritize the results, CAEL suggests a sequence of specific activities that relate to the most significant strengths and challenges identified by the surveys:

1. Continue work relative to the **Teaching-Learning Process** Principle:
   1. Continue respecting diversity of perspective and belief in the classroom.
   2. Continue providing adults with clear learning expectations for their lessons and courses.
   3. Universalize providing adult students with active feedback.
2. Continue work relative to the **Technology** Principle:
   1. Continue using technology as a primary avenue for communicating with adult students.
   2. Continue providing services and information at a distance via technology.
3. Continue work relative to the **Student Support Systems** Principle:
   1. Continue providing academic support services at flexible times and through flexible modes.
   2. Continue making support services accessible for all students, including adults those students with disabilities.
   3. Continue relationships with community organizations to facilitate outside referrals for wraparound services when adults need them.
4. Continue work relative to the **Outreach** Principle:
   1. Continue providing convenient, easy mechanisms for enrollment and registration.
   2. Continue marketing to prospective adults, emphasizing diversity of age at the University.
   3. Continue providing comprehensive, accessible academic advising and related pathways information.
   4. Investigate via the *Adult Learner 360* Data Hub what subpopulation of adult students would most benefit from access to mentors.
5. Take steps to improve upon the **Strategic Partnerships** Principle:
   1. Continue developing relationships with employers and community organizations to facilitate on-the-ground relationships within the University’s broader geographic region served.
   2. Offer networking and other career-related events at flexible times to maximize adult student participation.
   3. Identify key contacts across the University for managing partnerships with employers and other community stakeholders.
   4. Leverage local labor market information and socioeconomic data to inform the University’s efforts to target and develop relationships across the geographic region served.
6. Take steps to improve upon the **Life & Career Planning** Principle:
   1. Market career services to adult students, especially upon enrollment.
   2. Consistently promote prior learning assessment (PLA) throughout the enrollment and advising processes.
   3. Consistently promote prior learning assessment (PLA) internally to ensure advisors and staff understand the available options.
7. Take steps to improve upon the **Financing** Principle:
   1. Continue providing accessible, comprehensive guidance to adults regarding financial aid, financing an education, and tuition and payment systems.
   2. Consider extending available hours and modes for financial aid guidance.
   3. Develop and publish a financial aid webpage for adults.
   4. Parse out and publish scholarships for which adults are eligible.
8. Investigate the discrepant perspectives found in the **Assessment of Learning Outcomes** Principle:
   1. Continue effective academic aptitude assessment upon enrollment for placement in the appropriate level and rigor of coursework.
   2. Provide adults with opportunities to demonstrate their learning and skills through multiple modes.
   3. Provide all students with the criteria used to assess their learning and skills in advance of any assessment.

*Internal Comparisons*

The two instruments’ datasets provide valuable information about how adult students’ perceptions, as indicated on the ALSQ, compare to the UM-Augusta faculty, staff, and administration’s response to the IEA*.*

In addition to ranking the Principles on the two instruments, the *Adult Learner 360* Portal contains data and statistics that measure UM-Augusta’s performance relative to other institutions that completed the two *Adult Learner 360* assessments. It is important to remember that no one institution is “the best performer” on every Principle. In the percentile rankings contained in the Portal, data from the IEA are compared to other institutions’ IEA data, while ALSQ data are compared to other institutions’ ALSQ data. This analysis primarily examines the data from an internal perspective.

By comparing UM-Augusta’s internal perceptions with adult students’ perceptions, CAEL identifies points of agreement and divergence and, in turn, helps UM-Augusta identify and implement specific strategies to capitalize on strengths and address challenges.

UM-Augusta’s *Adult Learner 360* survey coordinator may circulate access to the *Adult Learner 360* Data Hub among the University’s faculty, staff, and administration. This data contains several layers of functionality to make comparisons against specific student population groups and institutional characteristics.

The following table provides adult students’ scores for satisfaction in each Principle and the related scores provided by faculty, staff, and administration for quality/effectiveness.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **CAEL Principle** | **Quality/ Effectiveness Score** | **Student**  **Satisfaction Score** |
| Outreach | 3.9/5.0 | 4.1/5.0 |
| Life & Career Planning | 3.6/5.0 | 3.6/5.0 |
| Financing | 3.8/5.0 | 3.8/5.0 |
| Assessment of Learning Outcomes | 3.4/5.0 | 4.0/5.0 |
| The Teaching-Learning Process | 3.7/5.0 | 4.1/5.0 |
| Student Support Systems | 3.8/5.0 | 4.0/5.0 |
| Technology | 3.8/5.0 | 4.3/5.0 |
| Strategic Partnerships | 3.2/5.0 | 3.4/5.0 |
| Transitions | 3.9/5.0 | 3.9/5.0 |
| Adaptivity | 3.5/5.0 | 3.9/5.0 |

*Strengths*

A Principle receives designation as a strength when institutional participants report **high quality and effectiveness** relative to the other Principles, and student respondents report **high satisfaction** with the same Principle relative to the others. This assessment reveals that participants consider five Principles to be strengths: the **Teaching-Learning Process, Technology, Student Support Systems,** and **Outreach.**

The **Teaching-Learning Process** Principle examines how effectively UM-Augusta’s “faculty use multiple methods of instruction (including experiential and problem-based methods) for adult learners in order to connect curricular concepts to useful knowledge and skills.”

Both sets of respondents report that instructors respect differences of perspectives and beliefs in the classroom. From a broader perspective, in the **Outreach** Principle, respondents indicate that this is characteristic of the University as a whole. The University should persist in efforts to welcome diverse students, including diversity of age. This should extend into marketing efforts to demonstrate the diversity of students in the classroom to prospective adult students.

Both sets of respondents endorse instructors’ flexibility in meeting with their adult students. Adults are especially satisfied with their instructors’ communicating clear learning expectations for each course, and they report that these learning expectations are achievable. Clear learning expectations help adult students keep track of their learning and articulate what they have learned. Accessible instructors who flexibly meet with their adult students allow for open communication, ensuring that when an adult needs assistance, they can obtain that help.

Adult students endorse their instructors’ provision of clear, meaningful, timely, and relevant feedback on both assessments and their in-class exercises. Institutional respondents concur with students’ perspectives on feedback, both here and in the **Assessment of Learning Outcomes** Principle. These characteristics encompass active feedback, a critical component of active learning that serves adult students well. Adult students seek to immediately apply their classroom learning—actively—to life and work experiences, both past and present. Timely and clear feedback helps them do so effectively before they make mistakes in life and work. This is one way that adult students find immediate value in their learning.

The **Technology** Principle examines how effectively the University “uses technology to provide relevant and timely information and to enhance the learning experience.”

Respondents report that the University effectively utilizes technology to enhance institution-student communication. This helps distance-students remain connected to the University, regardless of whether they step foot on campus in a particular term. Robust communication channels effectively facilitate most practices found throughout this assessment. Challenges can be mitigated through strategic use of technology to push information to adults’ fingertips.

Respondents further agree that technology enhances equity and provides access to support services at a distance. For an adult with work, family, and school priorities, an extra trip to campus can pull them away from caregiving or job responsibilities. By making services accessible through technology, the University ensures that adults can tap into institutional resources and find answers throughout the day. The University may leverage these strengths in **Technology** to mitigate most gaps identified that relate to service accessibility.

The **Student Support Systems** Principle explores how effectively UM-Augusta “assists adult learners using comprehensive academic and student support systems in order to enhance students’ capacities to become self-directed, lifelong learners.”

Adult students are particularly satisfied with the accessibility of academic support systems. Internal respondents agree, reporting that tutoring, academic resources, and remediation are easy and convenient for adults to access. Further, respondents agree that faculty and staff are appropriately responsive when adult students request assistance. Flexible, accessible academic resources help adult students stay on track while considering their unique scheduling needs. Ensuring academic support services are available at a distance will help universalize adults’ utilization, which impacts their persistence and success.

Institutional respondents similarly endorse the accessibility of support systems, including via **Technology**. They further indicate that services are accessible for students with disabilities. While most adult students agree with this response, the reader is cautioned to always consider the individual circumstances that students with disabilities may have and to ensure that those students who utilize disability services are heard, prioritized, and valued.

Additionally, respondents agree that for health and wellness resources, including social support, the University provides adults with appropriate referrals to community centers to receive them. In the **Strategic Partnerships** Principle, respondents indicate that the University adequately communicates with students about its relationships with community organizations. The University should persist in efforts to develop relationships with such organizations; they may serve as prospective partners to help address challenges related to other wraparound supports, such as the apparent need for accessible, high-quality resources for dependents in students’ care.

The **Outreach** Principle examines how effectively the University “conducts its outreach to adult learners by overcoming barriers in time, place, and tradition in order to create lifelong access to educational opportunities.”

Respondents praise the processes through with adult students enroll at the University and register for their courses. They note that adults have easy and convenient access to assistance from the admissions team, whether online or in-person. Institutional respondents further endorse the effectiveness of marketing efforts to reach adults. This theme of accessibility echoes the best practices identified through **Technology** and **Student Support Systems**. The University should persist in efforts to break down barriers to enrollment.

Respondents report that the University satisfactorily provides courses through flexible modes that facilitate adult students’ persistence and provide choice. Adult students indicate that academic pathways are customized with the flexibility needed for them to schedule their courses around expected conflicts with work and life engagement. Both here and in the **Life & Career Planning** Principle, adult students further report satisfaction with academic advisors and with the availability of information that helps them make decisions. Overall, academic pathways appear well-articulated and accessible, and academic advising receives strong endorsements from questionnaire respondents. The University should persist in efforts to bridge adults with academic guidance and support.

Carefully-planned, customized academic plans can help adult students avoid preplanned gaps in course availability (day/evening, online/in person, etc.). Preplanned gaps in academic pathways provide opportunity for adults to complete their electives or general education requirements. Unplanned interruptions in courses of study can lead to adults failing to return in the subsequent semester, while a planned interruption—only if absolutely necessary—provides opportunities for advisors to reach out directly and encourage reenrollment as new deadlines approach.

Across the **Outreach, Life & Career Planning,** and **Strategic Partnerships** Principles, adult students indicate that they would benefit from having access to mentors. The breadth of mentorship needed will vary by the adult student, their purpose for enrollment, their socioeconomic circumstances, prior experience with higher education, and place of origin. This disconnect warrants close investigation via focus groups, parsing into the data found in the *Adult Learner 360 Data Hub* to identify student demographics related to an increased interest in mentorship.

The Principles classified as strengths work in tandem to engage adult students with UM-Augusta. These Principles may be leveraged to address challenges and mitigate disconnects found in this report.

*Challenges*

Principles designated as “challenges” received the **lowest relative satisfaction and effectiveness ratings**. At UM-Augusta, three Principles contained challenges: **Strategic Partnerships, Life & Career Planning,** and **Adaptivity**. Challenges represent opportunities for the University to improve individual benchmarks to impact adult student satisfaction and institutional effectiveness.

The **Strategic Partnerships** Principle examines how effectively UM-Augusta “engages in strategic relationships, partnerships, and collaborations with employers and other organizations to develop and improve educational opportunities for adult learners.”

From an internal perspective, the University does commendable work to develop relationships with employers to create opportunities for adult students. Respondents especially endorse relationships with community-based organizations. These connections have resulted in the referrals that respondents endorsed in the **Student Support Systems** Principle. These partnerships may be leveraged to explore referral opportunities for affordable dependent care—a barrier to persistence identified by some of the University’s adult students.

Adult student respondents report that it is very important to them to have access to opportunities to meet with employers, but satisfaction scores suggest that these opportunities are not adequately accessible. Internal respondents concur, recognizing that more can be done to connect adults with employers for informational interviews, job shadowing, and internships. Adult students have myriad reasons for attending higher education, including career changing, career advancing, seeking new opportunities after a long period since their last job, upskilling, and pursuing further education. For adults whose previous positions have been automated, it may have been decades since their last interview. Networking opportunities should be marketed to adults, and career-oriented events should occur at flexible times where possible. This will help adults make the connections they need to succeed post-completion.

From an internal perspective, faculty and staff report a need to train a designated staff person who is/would be responsible for identifying and partnering with employers and community-based organizations. Since relationships with employers and community organizations already exist, it is likely that the responsibility for developing these relationships is not centralized. A designated point-of-contact for developing such relationships may be needed.

In the **Adaptivity** Principle, respondents report that the University could better gather and act upon data related to the economic and socioeconomic needs of the surrounding community. The University would be well-served to examine the data about economic and socioeconomic needs in greater Augusta. Understanding this data can help reveal trends in whether and why adult students choose to (re)enroll at UM-Augusta. It can further help justify the expansion—or outsourcing—of key wraparound services needed to lift up the community of which the University is an anchor institution. The aforementioned designated staff person would ideally provide the University with insights related to this data.

The **Life & Career Planning** Principle examines how effectively UM-Augusta “addresses adult learners’ life and career goals before or at the onset of enrollment in order to assess and align its capacities to help learners reach their goals.”

Respondents indicate that adult students would benefit from a more proactive approach to career advising. Adults report that they are not encouraged to engage with career services. Although access is not identified as the key issue, adult students do not feel encouraged to engage with career advisors. Career services staff can provide coaching for career-changers, adults looking to reenter the workforce, and adults whose occupations may have been automated. Career advisors can help adult students recognize and communicate the value of their prior life and work experiences. Integrating career advising into adult students’ plans can provide them with the needed skills and knowledge to successfully apply and interview for a new occupation. Ultimately, career advisors help adults plan for future success.

Respondents agree that prior learning assessment (PLA) practices at the University are somewhat effective—more so than at peer institutions across the University system. Adult students further indicate that the process for assessing their prior learning for potential credit is very important to them. The impact of robust PLA is well-researched; CAEL’s benchmark study *What Happens When Learning Counts?* has found that adults with PLA credit are two-and-a-half times more likely to persist than those who do not. Ultimately, PLA-earning adults take on average ten more credits at their institution conferring the credit.

From enrollment through the first year of study, adults should be encouraged to engage with PLA by admissions advisors, academic advisors, and their instructors. Student-friendly materials that emphasize promotion over policy help demystify PLA for adults. From an internal perspective, faculty and staff need greater understanding of how a student navigates the PLA process. Variance in student satisfaction scores may signal academic departments that provide more robust, or proactive, PLA than others.

**Financing** considers how effectively the University “promotes choice using an array of payment options for adult learners in order to expand equity and financial flexibility.”

Adult student respondents report that they are satisfied with the ease and convenience of obtaining assistance from the bursar and financial aid staff. They indicate that they can easily find tuition and payment options, and with the financial resources that the University makes available, they are able to complete their program at their desired pace. Institutional respondents concur, endorsing the effectiveness and quality of the service provided by financial aid staff. Access to financial aid information helps adults leverage the available options and triages their stopping out due to personal financial issues.

Adult students identify gaps regarding the accessibility of information related to financial aid sources available to them, including scholarships. Institutional respondents agree that the University could better provide adult students with the information needed to make decisions regarding financial aid. Respondents indicate that the financial aid-related staff provide adequate guidance to adult students. Considering that the financial aid office is not available at extended hours, this indicates that the information available at a distance may be inadequate.

To improve upon financial aid communication, the University may conduct an internal review of information posted for adult students. Institutional respondents reported that there is a need to flexibly address financial constraints that present barriers to adult students. The verbiage around financial aid, such as scholarships, could be one such restraint.

By duplicating a draft of these webpages and removing all language strictly for traditional students (and their parents or guardians), UM-Augusta can evaluate whether the remaining information is sufficient for adult students. If not, missing elements can be added to the webpages. Linking these webpages to an adult student-focused landing page would increase the visibility of appropriate financial information.

To further break down this barrier, email an annual digest to adult students that highlights scholarship opportunities and key deadlines. This should be sent to students’ preferred email addresses and contain instructions for contacting financial aid officers. If financial aid workshops are available at flexible times and through flexible modes, include those opportunities in this digest.

Overall, despite this deficiency identified in this Principle, UM-Augusta’s financial aid staff should persist in efforts to support adult students.

*Additional Examination*

Often, throughout the *Adult Learner 360* process, institutions find that how they score Principles differs from adult students’ rankings. Disconnects occur where significant differences emerge between the two questionnaires. Student respondents may be critical of a Principle with reportedly high institutional quality and effectiveness, and vice-versa.

The **Assessment of Learning Outcomes** Principle examines how effectively the University “defines and assesses the knowledge, skills, and competencies acquired by adult learners—both from the curriculum and from life and work experience—in order to assign credit and confer degrees with rigor.”

Adult students report broad satisfaction with this Principle, and they are especially satisfied with the level and rigor of the coursework they are placed in upon enrollment. Internal respondents concur with this observation, placing the highest effectiveness ratings upon this practice. Academic aptitude assessments help adult students begin their first term of study in appropriately rigorous courses and mitigates their feeling overwhelmed or underchallenged.

Adult student respondents indicate that they have the tools they need to compare what they know and can do against course and program objectives and that they have opportunities to demonstrate their knowledge and skills in different ways. Institutional respondents are critical of this practice. This suggests that what occurs in adult student-facing classrooms may not apply to broad institutional practice. All students benefit from having multiple modes of assessment employed in the classroom. It may be that adult student-facing programs are designed with a focus upon learned competencies, while other programs where adults enroll may not have opportunities for hands-on assessments or opportunities to relate learning to life and work experiences.

Adult students also strongly endorse their instructors’ provision of rubrics for courses and assessments in advance of evaluation. Institutional respondents suggest that improvements are needed here. Clearly-articulated learning outcomes help adult students self-assess their skills in advance of an assessment. Given adults’ satisfaction, it is likely that most instructors provide comprehensive evaluation tools prior to evaluating the assessment. This best practice should be universalized across the University.

*Summary*

This *Adult Learner 360* has yielded important information about UM-Augusta and its services for adult students. Oftentimes, improving one item in the *Adult Learner 360* Toolkit will improve adult student satisfaction with several Principles. The University would be well served to engage the participants in carefully considering the responses on the *Adult Learner 360* to continue to attract, retain, and graduate adult students. We hope that UM-Augusta will use these results to discuss points of agreement and divergence and use those insights to create specific strategies to capitalize on its strengths—and address its challenges—in effectively serving its adult students.