State Higher Education Efforts Aimed at Adult Learners

BY SUNNY DEYE

Today’s college student is much less likely to be your typical college freshman who just graduated from high school and is attending college full-time. In fact, among today’s college students, almost 40% of students are 25 years old or older—and this percentage is growing every year. Today’s students are more diverse than any previous generation of college students, by age, race, and income level. They are increasingly mobile, and many live off campus, with work and family responsibilities competing with their educational goals.

Most state financial aid programs cover only tuition and fees. However, those costs constitute just a portion of what most students spend to attend public two- or four-year institutions. Beyond the cost of tuition are additional costs including textbooks, transportation, childcare and living expenses such as food and housing. For some students, these costs equal more than tuition and fees.

Online, Competency-Based Programs

Competency-based learning in higher education offers students the opportunity to work at their own pace through coursework leading to a degree or credential. There are a variety of models for competency-based higher education, but they typically have the following elements in common:

- Students move at their own pace and demonstrate mastery of competencies to progress.
- Tuition is charged in chunks of time rather than credit hour.
- Instruction is delivered online.

Two of the nation’s largest competency-based higher education providers are Western Governors University and Southern New Hampshire University. Both are non-profit organizations that offer degrees to students across multiple states.

While traditional colleges have seen dramatic drops in enrollment during the pandemic—accord-
ing to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, the number of undergraduate students has fallen 4% since the fall of 2019—students aren’t leaving online colleges. In fact, at primarily online institutions, enrollments are growing at both the undergraduate and graduate levels (+6.8% and +7.2%, respectively), regardless of student age. Adult students, age 25 and older—who make up most of the undergraduates at these institutions—increased 5.5%, after a 6.3% decline in the year before the pandemic.

**State Action**

Most states have provisions allowing for competency-based higher education, but not all have funding available to support students. Utah recently addressed this through House Bill 328 (2021), the Adult Learners Grant Program, to provide financial assistance to adult students pursuing online education. Eligibility is limited to students who are at least 26 years old, are financially needy, and are pursuing an online degree or certificate in a field with an industry need. The program will prioritize grants to students from rural areas, minority students, low-income students, and first-generation students.

States are increasingly investing in programs serving adult learners. In 2019, Washington enacted House Bill 2158, creating the Washington College Grant program. With new revenue included in the legislation, the program guarantees financial aid to qualified students to attend college for free or at a discounted rate. Eligibility is determined by the state’s median family income, which is about $92,000 for a family of four. The maximum award amount is equal to the value of full tuition and fees at public colleges and universities and may be used for other expenses, such as books and housing. In addition to community college, the grants can serve students in registered apprenticeships and at any of the state’s private colleges and universities. The program is available to adults as well as recent high school graduates.

Helping today’s student navigate available assistance with non-tuition costs such as food, housing, childcare, and transportation is another area of interest. This year, Oregon enacted House Bill 2835, requiring each community college and public university to hire a benefits navigator to assist students in determining eligibility and applying for federal, state and local benefits programs. The bill creates a statewide consortium to enable coordination and develop best practices among benefits navigators across institutions. Also in 2021, Illinois enacted Senate Bill 190 to require higher education institutions, including business, technical or vocational schools, to designate at least one employee to serve as a liaison between the institution and the homeless student to assist in accessing resources. Maryland House Bill 891 establishes a Hunger-Free Campus Grant Program to connect eligible students with SNAP application assistance and local SNAP retailers.

**Federal Action**

The American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 provides $36 billion to public and private non-profit institutions. Institutions must spend at least 50% of their allocation on emergency financial aid grants provided directly to students. Institutions can use any remaining funds to replace lost revenue, reimburse for emergency expenses, and more. Funds must be spent within a year once an institution receives them from the U.S. Department of Education.

To help institutions quickly and effectively utilize the ARF funds to support their students and communities, the U.S. Department of Education released guidance detailing how institutions can use these funds to support vulnerable students, monitor and suppress the coronavirus, and reengage students whose education was disrupted by the pandemic.