2011 Research Report

National Adult Learners Satisfaction-Priorities Report

- Adult students' priorities for their learning experience
- Institutional strengths and challenges from the adult learner perspective
- Influences on the decision to enroll
- Data from 29,679 students at 61 four-year institutions and 4,749 students from 18 two-year institutions
- Study conducted by Noel-Levitz and CAEL

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To quickly find the priorities for adult learners, see pages 6-9.

The 2011 National Adult Learners Satisfaction-Priorities Report

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Introduction and Overview

The importance of student satisfaction assessment

Adult learners are a growing population on campuses across the country. An increasing number of institutions are adding adult-focused programs to their offerings. Students are seeking course offerings which are flexible and fast paced to allow them to meet their educational goals while still balancing work and family responsibilities.

Serving the needs of adult learners in this environment becomes a greater priority for colleges and universities. Student satisfaction is considered a core element for higher education institutions serving traditional-age students, and now more colleges and universities are expanding this assessment activity to adult learners as well. As this group becomes a larger segment of the overall student population, it is important to include adult learners in systematic assessment activities.

Satisfaction assessment enables institutions to strategically and tactically target areas most in need of immediate improvement. It facilitates the development of planning and intervention priorities specific to adult learners, and it helps institutions examine student transactions with all major aspects of their experience, including academic, registration, and customer service.

College and university leaders must understand how satisfied adult learners are with their educational experience—both inside and outside of the classroom setting—in order to best serve those students. By collecting satisfaction data from adult learners on a regular basis, campuses are able to determine where they are best serving these students and where there are areas for improvement.

Satisfied students are more likely to be successful students. Research indicates that institutions with more satisfied students have higher graduation rates, lower loan default rates, and higher alumni giving. Satisfaction with an institution includes a combination of academic factors as well as areas related to campus services. An institution needs to identify all of the issues that are relevant to students. These include their interaction with faculty, as well as the service they receive from staff and administrators; the resources provided to students; policies that are in place; and students' overall feelings about the value of the experience.

Satisfaction assessment can be further refined by capturing students' level of importance (or expectation). Importance ratings provide institutions with valuable data on the areas that matter most to students. With this view, institutions can celebrate their strengths—those areas that have high satisfaction AND high importance. Institutions can also focus their improvement efforts on areas where satisfaction is low AND importance is high, and not be distracted by low satisfaction areas that may not matter to adult learners.

The importance of fit

Campus leaders realize the importance of congruence or "fit" between what adult learners expect from their educational experience and their satisfaction with what they perceive as the reality of that experience. Research indicates that the greater the fit between expectations and reality, the greater the likelihood for persistence, student success, and stability. The opposite effect also applies: with greater incongruence or lack of fit comes higher attrition, poor performance, and fluctuation.

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Understanding this fit between what adult learners expect and what they experience is a primary benefit of satisfaction assessment. Importance indicators add another layer of understanding. The level of importance students place on a particular item indicates the level of expectation they assign to this area, and it also indicates the amount of value they associate with this item. Often an institution communicates value or the expectations that students should place on an area by the way they market or position themselves in a particular area. An institution can then better identify the fit between the student body and the institution when performance gaps are captured through the combination of satisfaction and importance data. A smaller performance gap indicates a better fit; a larger gap indicates more incongruence and an area of concern.

Responding is the key

Conducting satisfaction assessment is a way to show adult learners that the institution cares about their perceptions and their educational experience, but an even more significant way that an institution can show that it cares is by actively responding to student-identified issues. Once data have been collected, actively reviewed, and shared throughout the campus, then initiatives can be identified to respond to adult learner concerns. Data on the shelf have no power; data actively used to drive decision making can have the power to improve the success of the institution.

In the complex environment of today's higher education world, conducting satisfaction assessment is a way to ensure the vitality of the institution. Regular satisfaction assessment and active response to the issues shows the institutional stakeholders good stewardship of scarce resources in an optimal way. This practice inspires trust among stakeholders, including adult learners, boards of trustees, and even state legislatures.

It is also appropriate to note that satisfaction assessment should be a systematic process, not a one-time event. Shifts in satisfaction and expectations that are tracked over time can identify where institutions are responding appropriately and what new issues are current priorities. Data that are timely and relevant will have the highest impact. Adult learner characteristics and perceptions can change, and campus leaders will want to understand these changes in order to meet the transforming needs and circumstances of the student body.

A note about reviewing the data

While reviewing national results is vital for understanding the higher education marketplace, identification of individual institutional strengths and challenges is best done through data collected for those colleges. Campus leaders can identify their institution's unique strengths and challenges from the perceptions of their own adult learners.

The study

The 2011 National Adult Learners Satisfaction-Priorities Report presents the responses to the Adult Learner Inventory™ (ALI) of 29,679 students from 61 four-year private and public as well as 4,749 students from 18 two-year community and technical colleges. The results include adult learner responses over a three-year time period, from fall of 2008 through spring of 2011. The ALI was developed by Noel-Levitz and CAEL (Council for Adult and Experiential Learning). CAEL is a non-profit organization dedicated to expanding lifelong learning opportunities for adults. (For further description of the survey tool and the list of participating institutions, please see the appendix.)

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Importance—Satisfaction—Performance Gap

On the ALI, students respond to statements of expectation with an importance rating and a satisfaction rating. These ratings are on a scale of 1 to 7, with 7 being high. The student responses are averaged to produce an importance score and a satisfaction score for each item. A performance gap is calculated by subtracting the satisfaction score from the importance score. A larger performance gap indicates that the institution is not meeting student expectations; a smaller performance gap indicates that the institution is doing a relatively good job of meeting expectations. Negative performance gaps indicate the institution is exceeding student expectations; negative gaps are rare and are more likely to be found on items of low importance to students.

Reviewing the 2011 data

The 2011 National Adult Learners Satisfaction-Priorities Report includes the following data analyses:

- **The scales in order of importance.** The scales represent the individual items on the survey which have been clustered together conceptually and statistically. The scales are presented for the overall adult learner responses.
- **Strengths and challenges.** Strengths are identified as areas of high importance and high satisfaction. Challenges are defined as areas of high importance and low satisfaction and/or a large performance gap. This section identifies adult learners' key priorities for improvement as well as the top areas for celebration.
- **A review of enrollment factors in order of importance.** This section helps institutions consider the top influencers in students' decisions to enroll in an adult program.
- **Summary scores.** This section reveals the percentage responses to two summary items in the survey.

The scales

For the Adult Learner Inventory, the 47 items of expectation are analyzed statistically and conceptually to provide eight composite scales. These scales follow seven of the eight *Principles of Effectiveness for Serving Adult Learners*, as defined by CAEL, plus a new area focusing on transitions.

- ***Outreach*** assesses the way the institution conducts its outreach to adult learners by overcoming barriers of time, place, and tradition in order to create lifelong access to educational opportunities.
- ***Life and Career Planning*** assesses how the institution 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.
- ***Financing*** assesses the way the institution promotes choice using an array of payment options for adult learners in order to expand equity and financial flexibility.
- ***Assessment of Learning Outcomes*** looks at the way the institution defines and assesses the knowledge, skills, and competencies acquired by adult learners both from the curriculum and from life/work experience in order to assign credit and confer degrees with rigor.
- ***Teaching-Learning Process*** assesses how the institution'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.
- ***Student Support Systems*** addresses how the institution assists adult learners using comprehensive academic and student support systems in order to enhance students' capabilities to become self-directed, lifelong learners.
- ***Technology*** assesses the institution's use of information technology to provide relevant and timely information to enhance the learning experience.
- ***Transitions*** assesses how the institution supports guided pathways leading into and from its programs and services in order to assure that students' learning will apply to successful achievement of their educational and career goals. Currently, the transitions scale is only reflected on the community college results.

The final principle is ***Strategic Partnerships***. This principle can be assessed through CAEL's Institutional Self-Assessment Survey (ISAS). Strategic Partnerships looks at how the institution engages in strategic relationships, partnerships, and collaborations with employers and other organizations in order to develop and improve educational opportunities for adult learners.

The Results

Analysis of the scales

Separate data are presented for adult learners at four-year and two-year institutions.

The best place to begin is by looking at the big picture and understanding the areas on campus that matter most to adult learners. The following table summarizes the importance, satisfaction, and performance gap findings for the eight scales on the Adult Learner Inventory. They are listed in order of importance.

2011 Scales: *Adult Learner Inventory: Four-Year College and University Version*

Scale	Importance Mean	Satisfaction Mean	*Performance Gap Mean*
Outreach	**6.51**	5.71	*0.80*
Life and Career Planning	**6.39**	5.33	*1.06*
Financing	**6.36**	5.41	*0.95*
Teaching-Learning Process	**6.35**	5.74	*0.61*
Technology	**6.27**	5.72	*0.55*
Transitions	**6.25**	5.49	*0.76*
Student Support Systems	**6.22**	5.46	*0.76*
Assessment of Learning Outcomes	**6.06**	5.38	*0.68*

(7 = very important /very satisfied 1 = not important/not satisfied at all)

Priorities are similar for adult students at both types of institutions.

2011 Scales: *Adult Learner Inventory: Community College Version*

Scale	Importance Mean	Satisfaction Mean	*Performance Gap Mean*
Outreach	**6.52**	5.61	*0.91*
Financing	**6.42**	5.40	*1.02*
Life and Career Planning	**6.41**	5.19	*1.22*
Teaching-Learning Process	**6.34**	5.71	*0.63*
Technology	**6.33**	5.70	*0.63*
Transitions	**6.32**	5.35	*0.97*
Student Support Systems	**6.25**	5.38	*0.87*
Assessment of Learning Outcomes	**6.14**	5.42	*0.72*

(7 = very important /very satisfied 1 = not important/not satisfied at all)

Adult learners enrolled at four-year and two-year institutions have similar priorities. Overall, four-year institutions are doing a better job meeting adult learner expectations, as reflected in the smaller performance gaps.

Strengths are areas of high importance and high satisfaction. Challenges are areas of high importance and low satisfaction.

Analysis

It is important that the analysis of the data include all three areas of measurement—importance, satisfaction, and performance gap. Focusing on only one area, such as performance gap, is likely to result in overlooking areas of the campus experience that adult learners value most. A combination of scores provides the most dynamic information for institutions to consider when developing an action agenda.

Using the matrix in Appendix II permits the institution to conceptualize its student satisfaction data by retention priorities (challenges) and marketing opportunities (strengths). In addition, it allows the institution to pinpoint areas where resources can be redirected from areas of low importance to areas of high importance.

Strengths and challenges

The individual items on the Adult Learner Inventory can be analyzed to determine strengths (high importance and high satisfaction). These are the items that the institution can incorporate into their marketing activities, recruiting materials, and internal and external public relations opportunities; and can use to provide positive feedback to the faculty, staff, administration, and students on campus. *Strengths are defined as being above the mid-point in importance and in the top quartile of satisfaction.*

The items can also be analyzed to determine the key challenges (high importance and low satisfaction). These are the areas that the campus needs to address to improve retention at the institution. They are items where adult learners expect a lot, but where the institution is currently failing to meet their expectations. The areas of dissatisfaction are prioritized by their importance score so the institution knows it is working in the areas that matter most to adult learners. *Challenges are defined as being above the mid-point in importance and in the bottom quartile of satisfaction or the top quartile of performance gaps.*

Following are the strengths and challenges as identified on the Adult Learner Inventory. They are listed in order of importance.

Four-year college and university version

Strengths
(high importance/high satisfaction):

- This institution explains what is needed for me to complete my program here.
- I have a clear understanding of what I'm expected to learn in my courses.
- My studies are closely related to my life and work goals.
- I am able to obtain information I need by phone, fax, e-mail, or online.
- The learning experiences within my program of study challenge me to reach beyond what I know already.
- Processes and procedures for enrolling here are convenient.
- My instructors respect student opinions and ideas that differ from their own.
- Technology enables me to get the services I need when I need them.
- I am encouraged to apply the classes I've taken toward a degree or certificate.
- The frequency of interactions with my instructors is adequate.

Challenges
(high importance/low satisfaction):

- My program allows me to pace my studies to fit my life and work schedules.
- My instructors provide timely feedback about my academic progress.
- Sufficient course offerings within my program of study are available each term.
- I am able to choose course delivery that fits my life circumstances.
- Billing for tuition and fees is tailored to meet my specific needs.

Community college version

Strengths
(high importance/high satisfaction):

- I have a clear understanding of what I'm expected to learn in my courses.
- My studies are closely related to my life and work goals.
- Processes and procedures for enrolling here are convenient.
- I am able to obtain information I need by phone, fax, e-mail, or online.
- Technology enables me to get the services I need when I need them.
- The learning experiences within my program of study challenge me to reach beyond what I know already.
- The frequency of interactions with my instructors is adequate.
- I am encouraged to apply the classes I've taken towards a degree or certificate.
- My instructors respect student opinions and ideas that differ from their own.

Challenges
(high importance/low satisfaction):

- My program allows me to pace my studies to fit my life and work schedules.
- Sufficient course offerings within my program of study are available each term.
- Advisors are knowledgeable about requirements for courses and programs of interest
  to me.
- I receive the help I need to make decisions about courses and programs that interest me.
- I receive adequate information about sources of financial assistance available to me.

Enrollment factors: four-year college and university version

Availability of programs and convenience of classes are the top factors for enrollment.

Institutions should be aware of the factors which influence their adult learners' decisions to enroll in the program. Institutions often use this type of information to shape their recruitment activities. In this study, the enrollment factors indicated in descending order of importance for adult learners were as follows:

Enrollment Factors: Four-Year Institutions

Rank	Item	Importance
1	Availability of program I wanted	6.67
2	Convenient time and place for classes	6.65
3	Flexible pacing for completing a program	6.52
4	Time required to complete program	6.49
5	Availability of financial assistance	6.45
6	Cost	6.38
7	Requirement for current or future job	6.37
8 (tie)	Ability to transfer credits	6.34
8 (tie)	Reputation of institution	6.34
10	Availability of online courses	6.20
11 (tie)	Program accreditation by professional organization	6.07
11 (tie)	High rate of job placement	6.07
13	Credit for learning gained from life and work experiences	6.06
14	Distance from campus	5.96
15	Tuition reimbursement from employer	5.95
16	Ability to design my own program	5.86
17	Employer endorsement	5.00
18	Courses held at employment site	4.28
19	Labor union support	4.10
20	Availability of child care	3.83

Availability of the program and convenience were the primary motivating factors for enrollment in the program, followed closely by flexible pacing and time required to complete the program. Availability of financial assistance and ability to transfer credits also played a strong factor in enrollment decision making. Cost jumped to the sixth most important factor, up from eighth just a year ago.

Enrollment factors: community colleges version

The community college version of the Adult Learner Inventory reveals the following enrollment factors, in descending order of importance:

Enrollment Factors: Community Colleges

Rank	Item	Importance
1 (tie)	Availability of program I wanted	6.50
1 (tie)	Convenient time and place for classes	6.50
3	Cost	6.43
4	Requirement for current or future job	6.33
5 (tie)	Flexible pacing for completing a program	6.24
5 (tie)	Availability of financial assistance	6.24
7	Time required to complete program	6.22
8	Distance from campus	6.18
9	Ability to transfer credits	6.12
10	High rate of job placement	5.96
11	Reputation of institution	5.94
12	Availability of online courses	5.73
13	Ability to design my own program	5.70
14	Credit for learning gained from life and work experiences	5.64
15	Program accreditation by professional organization	5.63
16	Tuition reimbursement from employer	5.33
17	Employer endorsement	4.42
18	Availability of child care	4.18
19	Courses held at employment site	4.17
20	Labor union support	3.98

Availability of programs and convenient time and place tied for the primary motivating factors for enrollment. Cost and requirement for a current or future job also were strong factors in enrollment decision making. Flexible pacing and availability of financial assistance tied for fifth most important factors.

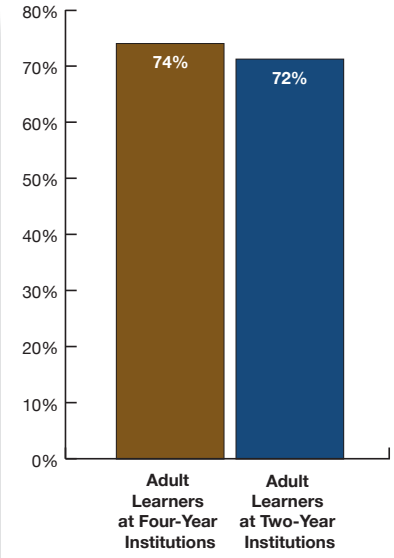
Summary scores

This section of the report presents the percentage responses to two summary items on the survey. Near the end of each survey, students are asked to respond on a scale of 1 to 7 to two summary items: 1) How would you rate your overall satisfaction with this program? 2) Would you recommend this program to other adult learners?

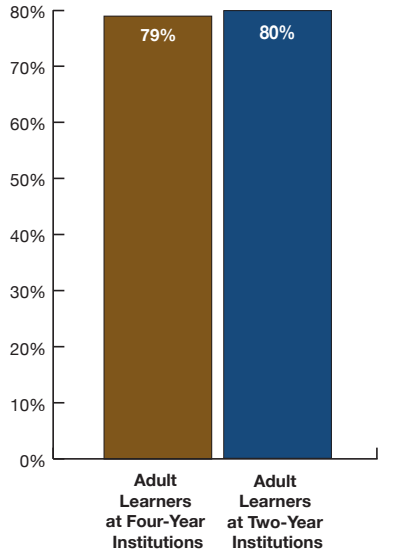
The 2011 National Adult Learners Satisfaction-Priorities Report reveals that at four-year colleges and universities, 74 percent of adult learners are satisfied or very satisfied with their experience and 79 percent would probably or definitely recommend the program to other adult students. Similarly, at two-year institutions, 72 percent of adult learners are satisfied or very satisfied and 80 percent would probably or definitely recommend the program to other adult students.

Overall, this indicates that adult learners are very pleased with their experiences and feel that institutions are doing a good job in delivering education to adult students. As indicated in the list of challenges which appeared earlier in this report, there is still room for improvement in some key areas, but overall, colleges are performing well in this area.

Satisfaction: Adult Learners



Recommend Program: Adult Learners



What does this mean for your campus?

Survey your adult learners. Effective institutions survey their students regularly, compare their data to their past performance, and then actively respond to the challenges. It is important to be aware of national trends for a broader perspective, but the perception of your own adult learners is the most meaningful.

Appendix I. Sample Items

Importance to me…
1 = not important at all
2 = not very important
3 = somewhat unimportant
4 = neutral
5 = somewhat important
6 = important
7 = very important

Sample Adult Learner Inventory Items

…My level of satisfaction
1 = not satisfied at all
2 = not very satisfied
3 = somewhat dissatisfied
4 = neutral
5 = somewhat satisfied
6 = satisfied
7 = very satisfied

Importance								My level of satisfaction						
①	②	③	④	⑤	⑥	⑦	My program allows me to pace my studies to fit my life and work schedules.	①	②	③	④	⑤	⑥	⑦
①	②	③	④	⑤	⑥	⑦	Sufficient course offerings within my program of study are available each term.	①	②	③	④	⑤	⑥	⑦
①	②	③	④	⑤	⑥	⑦	Billing for tuition and fees is tailored to meet my specific needs.	①	②	③	④	⑤	⑥	⑦
①	②	③	④	⑤	⑥	⑦	I'm assessed on the knowledge and skills I'll need in my life and career.	①	②	③	④	⑤	⑥	⑦
①	②	③	④	⑤	⑥	⑦	My instructors provide timely feedback about my academic progress.	①	②	③	④	⑤	⑥	⑦
①	②	③	④	⑤	⑥	⑦	This institution provides "one-stop shopping" for most student support services.	①	②	③	④	⑤	⑥	⑦
①	②	③	④	⑤	⑥	⑦	Technology enables me to get the services I need when I need them.	①	②	③	④	⑤	⑥	⑦
①	②	③	④	⑤	⑥	⑦	The frequency of interaction with my instructors is adequate.	①	②	③	④	⑤	⑥	⑦
①	②	③	④	⑤	⑥	⑦	Processes and procedures for enrolling here are convenient.	①	②	③	④	⑤	⑥	⑦
①	②	③	④	⑤	⑥	⑦	I can receive credit for learning derived from my previous life and work experiences.	①	②	③	④	⑤	⑥	⑦

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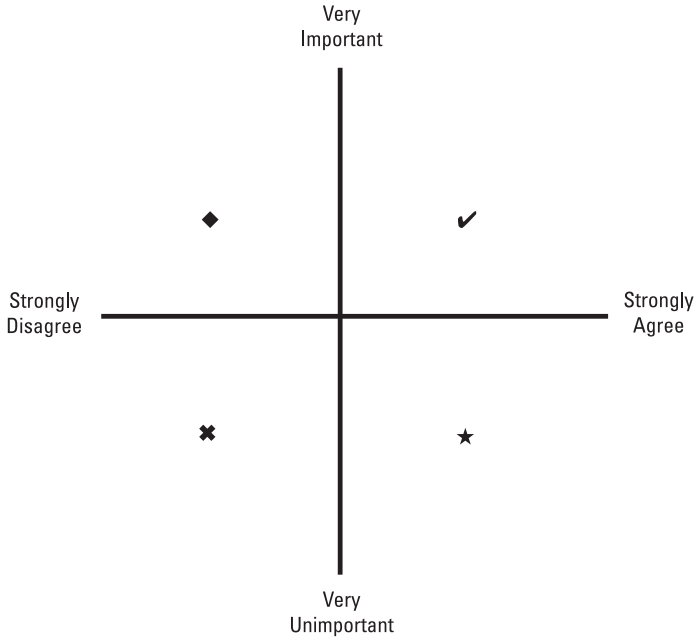
Appendix II. Matrix for Prioritizing Action



◆ **High importance/low satisfaction**

pinpoints areas that should claim the institution's immediate attention, i.e., retention agenda/priorities

✔ **High importance/high satisfaction**

showcases the institution's areas of strength that should be highlighted in promotional materials

✖ **Low importance/low satisfaction**

presents an opportunity for the institution to examine those areas that have low status with students

★ **Low importance/high satisfaction**

suggests areas from which it might be beneficial to redirect institutional resources to areas of higher importance

Appendix III. Institutional Participants

Four-Year Private and Public Universities

Adelphi University, NY
Albright College, PA
Amridge University, AL
Ashford University, IA
Barry University, FL
Becker College - Worcester, MA
Bethel University, MN
Black Hills State University, SD
Cambridge College, MA
Cardinal Stritch University, WI
Centenary College, NJ
Cleary University, MI
Columbus State University, GA
Dakota State University, SD
Dalton State College, GA
Doane College, NE
Eastern Kentucky University, KY
Edgewood College, WI
Elizabethtown College, PA
Florida Hospital College, FL
Fort Valley State University, GA
Georgia Southwestern State University, GA
Golden Gate University, CA
Governors State University, IL
Johnson C. Smith University, NC
Kaplan University, Kentucky State University, KY
Lincoln College - Normal, IL
Middle Tennessee State University, TN
Midstate College, IL
Millikin University, IL
Morehead State University, KY
Mount Olive College, NC
Murray State University, KY
North Park University, IL
Northern Kentucky University, KY
Northern State University, SD
Ohio Christian University, OH
Providence College, RI
Regent University, VA
Saint Joseph's College, NY
Saint Leo University, FL
South Dakota School Mines & Technology, SD
South Dakota State University, SD
Tabor College, KS
Temple University, PA
The University of Akron Main Campus, OH
Thomas Edison State College, NJ
Union Institute & University, OH
University of Connecticut, CT
University of Kentucky, KY
University of Louisville, KY
University of Pittsburgh, PA
University of South Dakota, SD
University of Southern Indiana, IN
University of St Francis, IL
University of the Incarnate Word, TX
University of Wisconsin-Superior, WI
Valdosta State University, GA
Widener University, PA
William Penn University, IA

Community Colleges

Atlanta Metropolitan College, GA
Bainbridge College, GA
East Arkansas Community College, AR
Elizabethtown Community and Technical College, KY
Gainesville State College, GA
Henderson Community College, KY
Inver Hills Community College, MN
Jefferson Community and Technical College, KY
Madison Area Technical College, WI
Mid-South Community College, AR
North Arkansas College, AR
Owensboro Community and Technical College, KY
Phillips Community College of the University of Arkansas, AR
Southeast Kentucky Community, KY
Suffolk County Community College, NY
University of Arkansas at Monticello, AR
University of Arkansas Community College at Hope, AR
West Kentucky Community and Technical College, KY

Questions about this report?

We hope you have found this report to be helpful and informative. If you have questions or would like more information about the findings, please contact Julie Bryant, Noel-Levitz associate vice-president of retention solutions, at 1-800-876-1117 or julie-bryant@noellevitz.com.

A word about Noel-Levitz

A trusted partner to higher education, Noel-Levitz helps systems and campuses reach and exceed their goals for enrollment, marketing, and student success. Over the past three decades, the higher education professionals at Noel-Levitz have consulted directly more than 2,700 colleges and universities nationwide in the areas of:

- Student retention
- Staff and advisor development
- Student success
- Marketing and recruitment
- Financial aid services
- Research and communications
- Institutional effectiveness

Noel-Levitz has developed an array of proven tools and software programs; diagnostic tools and instruments; Web-based training programs; and customized consultations, workshops, and national conferences. With the Satisfaction-Priorities Surveys, including the Adult Learner Inventory, the firm brings together its many years of research and campus-based experience to enable you to get to the heart of your campus agenda.

For more information, contact:

Noel-Levitz, Inc.
2350 Oakdale Boulevard
Coralville, Iowa 52241-9702

Phone: 800-876-1117
Fax: 319-626-8388
E-mail: ContactUs@noellevitz.com

For more information on the Principles of Effectiveness for Serving Adult Learners, contact:

Judith Wertheim
Vice President for Higher Education Services
CAEL
55 East Monroe Street, Suite 1930
Chicago, IL 60603
Phone: 312-499-2600
Fax: 312-499-2601
E-mail: jwertheim@cael.org
www.cael.org

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For additional self-study options, CAEL has developed an Institutional Self-Assessment Survey that complements the Adult Learner Inventory. Contact CAEL for more information on this survey and for information on becoming a partner in the Coalition of Adult Learning Focused Institutions.

Find it online.

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