

Adult Learners Working Group

Scope

This conversation is focused on credit-bearing academic programs and courses that are offered in places/modalities other than face-to-face on the main campus in DeKalb. We will refer to these as “adult learners.” This represents about 5% - 10% of the credit hour production in the university, and also represents the greatest growth opportunity for the university’s enrollments. Within the sphere of course & program offerings, there are a variety of components:

- a) Marketing (including market prospecting and analysis)
- b) Recruiting & admissions
- c) On-boarding & orientation
- d) Course and program delivery
- e) Logistical support
- f) Student support services
- g) Financial model and cost structure

This conversation will focus on items (d) – (g). Issues involving marketing, recruiting and admissions will be addressed in the parallel conversation on those topics. We will take care to cross-reference the work between the different conversations, but they will proceed separately.

Face-to-face off-campus programming includes a variety of different activities: individual courses offered at the NIU regional centers; cohort programs offered at a business or school; study-abroad programs; field schools; ... While this conversation will take cognizance of off-campus courses offered at remote locations such as study abroad or field schools, the primary focus will be on online offerings and offerings with a face-to-face component in the Chicagoland region.

Hybrid courses whose face-to-face component is delivered on the main campus may come within the purview of this project, but at the outset, that is not seen as an integral component of the project.

Goal

The university has both the obligation to serve the region, and the internal need to grow enrollments. The university is simultaneously facing the challenges of highly uncertain state support, which is compelling us to be a more enrollment-driven institution; and the challenges of changed demographics that signal that, for the foreseeable future, the university will not be able to rely on its traditional recruiting populations of high school graduates and community college transfer students. At the same time, NIU is positioned to serve a region that contains a very significant number of potential adult learner recruits. Both our mission and our sustainability require us to grow our adult learner enrollments, and to do so in ways that provide students with complete pathways (to whatever their individual goal is) while enhancing the university’s financial position.

Charge & Deliverables

The working group is charged with developing and presenting to the President a model for organizing and supporting the delivery of credit-bearing activities that fall outside of the traditional on-campus face-to-face. That model should:

- Improve efficiency and minimize duplication of services (while being open to the nuance between duplication of services and distribution of services);
- Increase enrollment and tuition generation from these modalities/locations;
- Provide a sustainable financial structure, including incentives and cost-recovery.

The model should include:

- A service plan, identifying what activities/services are needed, how those services are provided, and by whom. If multiple units are involved, how are they organized, differentiated and coordinated?
- A financial plan, including some basis for price-setting, protocols for revenue distribution, including provisions for cost-recovery and distribution of net revenue.
- Integration with the marketing & recruiting plan. This should give particular attention to the process of determining which programs and courses should be targeted for marketing, recruiting and delivery in online or off-campus modes; as well as a process for determining when programs and courses should be phased out.

When developing a strategy, the working group should consider national best practices, identify gaps between the current and new systems, and recommend bridging strategies.

The development of any plan must be data-informed and have an outcomes assessment strategy. Given scarce resources, each strategy must emphasize efficiency in terms of time and money.

The working group is further charged with making their best effort to continue the “trustee mentality” of program prioritization. The working group is formed to develop the best options to advance this aspect of the university mission, and members are invited to approach this in a collaborative spirit, rather than to serve as representatives or advocates for a particular unit or existing structure.

Constraints

The university has evolved a complicated set of pricing structures for students. Without trying to enumerate all variations, we can note that we have different structures for graduate students vs. undergraduates; for contract courses/programs; for in-state vs. regional vs. out-of-state/international; different fees for on-campus vs. off-campus; ...

- The working group is encouraged to consider alternative pricing structures, understanding that any changes will require approval by the Board of Trustees, and must respect Illinois Truth-in-Tuition requirements.
- At the same time, the working group is expected to produce a model that includes realistic estimates of all costs, both direct and indirect; to protect against the creation of perverse incentives; and to propose a mechanism for monitoring programs to ensure their financial success.
- Student services must be organized in ways that are clear and sensible to the students – the “Huskie Shuffle” needs to be minimized or eliminated.

Membership

A working group has been constituted, a joint effort between the Division of Academic Affairs and the Division of Outreach, Engagement and Regional Development.

- Division of Academic Affairs: Brad Bond; Laurie Elish-Piper; Susan Mini; Balaji Rajagopalan; Jason Rhode
- Division of Outreach, Engagement and Regional Development: Brian Becker; Diana Robinson; Anne Kaplan; Meryl Sussman; Linda Traff

Participants from other divisions will be engaged as needed to address specific issues such as financial modeling, providing student services or meeting technology needs.

Timeline

The working group should present its recommendations early in 2017.