

Inside Higher Ed, September 14, 2011 (Page 1 of 2)

Low-hanging fruit

September 14, 2011

WASHINGTON -- Whether they called them "near-completers" or "ready adults" or "stop-outs," the educators and policy experts gathered here today agreed that people who have earned most but not all of the credits they need for a college degree should receive more attention.

The Institute for Higher Education Policy held a meeting here Tuesday focused on how these people could be key to meeting President Obama's goal of seeing a larger share of Americans earn degrees. The meeting broke down the issue of near-completers into four categories: assessment, recruitment, affordability and recognition of completion.

Michelle Asha Cooper, president of the institute, said she hoped the meeting would help elevate the discussion of near-completer students to the national level and to bring cohesion to all of the groups working on the issue. "Not only are we charged with helping students see their future, but we have to do that collaboratively," Cooper said.

Clifford Adelman, a senior associate at the institute, discussed the group's Project Win-Win, which in its first seven months helped nine institutions award nearly 600 associate degrees and identify almost 1,600 students using a chosen set of parameters, including missing a degree by nine or fewer credits and the grades required for graduation.

The program, focused on associate degrees, began two years ago and has since expanded, encompassing six states and assisting 35 institutions. As of July, 23 of the institutions identified more than 40,000 near-completer students. Identifying these students is no easy task, Adelman said. Some groups have checked state records, commissioned private companies and utilized degree verification agencies such as the National Student Clearinghouse.

"You're in for a lot of sweat to see who meets the criteria," he said. "But if you don't think this stuff has to be done you are living on Planet Zolar and not this one."

Patrick Lane, a project coordinator at Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, has seen that with his organization's "Non-traditional No More" program, which has ties to six states and helps institutions identify students close to completion but who have been unable to make the last step.

One strategy used is the "concierge" model of building a path for adult learners back to college. Institutions designate one person to work with returning students, rather than recruit students back and then leave them to wade through all the departments necessary to return. It's a "one-stop shop" for the student, eliminating bureaucratic barriers, Lane said.

"They help [colleges] pave the way back for the student," he said. "This gets to the heart of re-engaging students."

At the Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education, officials are taking a "holistic approach" to student completion, said Aaron Thompson, the council's senior vice president for academic affairs. "You can make all sorts of institutional or state policies, but if you don't have folks to evaluate it or involved with students, this process will not work," Thompson said.

The panelists here debated the importance and the feasibility of creating specific degree templates for

Inside Higher Ed, September 14, 2011 (Page 2 of 2)

returning students. Thompson said students want a specialized program, something they know they will be able to use in the workforce. Adelman replied: "If you want niche programs that's fine, but it won't make a big dent in bettering completion numbers. We talk about the concierge program, but this is not a valet."

Thompson clarified, saying institutions need both specialization for students and broader, uninhibited paths back to their education.

These more specialized templates are helpful in recruiting students back to higher education, Lane said, but it is taxing on faculty and college staff.

Lee Fisher, president and CEO of CEOs for Cities, gave the keynote address, saying the summit was just the first step in advancing such critical initiatives. There is no silver bullet for economic success and growth, but the best way to get there is an educated population, he said.

"If you argue the lowest-hanging fruit are the ready adults, the near-completers, or what I prefer to call the life learners, then the entire future of the world and the planet comes down to the 60 people in this room," Fisher said. "If we can capture this low-hanging fruit, we begin this process that is important not just to those men and women, to your institution, to your cities and your metro regions, but literally to the planet. It is that important."

— **Elizabeth Murphy**