
The Adult Learner: A Change Agent in Post-Secondary Education

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Abstract

While online universities and career colleges are experiencing increasing enrollment trends, the enrollment for traditional universities and colleges appears to be declining. Recent data shows that there is a slight decline in enrollment to the tradition 4-year college, while there is a steady increase within the technical and vocational institutions (Institute for Community Inclusion, 2006). This paper will explore the rise in demand of postsecondary education and how one small Catholic college in the upper mid-west, The College of St. Scholastica, is responding to this demand from adult learners.

Introduction

Statement of the Problem

While online universities and career colleges are experiencing trends in increasing enrollment the enrollment for traditional universities and colleges appears to be declining. Recent data show that there is a slight decline in enrollment to the tradition four-year college, while there is a steady increase within the technical and vocational institutions (Institute for Community Inclusion, 2006). The reasons behind these findings are multiple. Some researchers cite the exponential rise in costs related to tuition, room and board and various other fees associated with to institutional costs, while others attribute the shifting demand to the increase in online learning opportunities and an already college educated work force (Karoly & Panis, 2006).

Since the 1970's, the U.S. economy has gone through a conversion from a primarily manufacturing based economy to one that is information based (Reich, 2010). This transformation seems to have had a significant impact on the needs and demands placed on the current and future workforces. This places the future economy in a position of needing to retrain and educate the current and future work force, but in manner that is quick, effective, and relevant to the market, all while being cost effective.

The justification for not going to the traditional post-secondary educational institution is one that is rooted in logic. Some that wish to begin a career feel that the cost of the traditional option of post-secondary education (two- and four-year institutions is too costly, resulting in: 1) student loans that require long-term payments; 2) a feeling of uncertainty related to future professional prospects; and 3) a basic lack of desire (Rahman, Situ & Jimmo, 2005). While there are other, more long standing reasons why some do not attend a post-secondary option, the exponential increase in tuition costs is one of the most dramatic and long term problems college graduates will deal with (Reich, 2010). This issue of high tuition cost, resulting in large student debt, will not only impact enrollment rates and the overall work force, but will also affect the long term economic future of the U.S. economy (Reich, 2010).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to investigate the College of St. Scholastica's current strategic plan for market diversification through the examination of public data while analyzing this information against the current trends in adult and continuing education. Historically, the back bone of any economy has been a strong system of education (Reich, 2010). Today the U.S. economy is moving to a more information based system, resulting from global competition, not just local and regional completion as we have seen in the past. As the country moves toward a need to create a highly skilled workforce, the U.S. is seeing a decline in the production of post-secondary graduates with a rank of 12th in the world (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). It is only natural to assume that policy makers hope to create the same economic prosperity previous generations have seen, but for this to happen there must be an educated workforce available to meet the demands of the changing economies of the world.

Statement of Research Question

What will be the future role of The College of St. Scholastica in the face of competition from career colleges and for-profit online learning environments?

Definition of Terms

Throughout this study, several terms will be used to discuss the impact of education within the economy, including: *Post-Secondary Education*: Two and four year schools that provide academic training with the goal of awarding a degree or certification (Davis, 2008).

Workforce Development: Specified training curriculum designed to grow local economies (State of Minnesota Department of Workforce Development, 2010).

Land-Grant University: Institutions of higher education in the United States designated by each state to receive the benefits of the Morrill Acts of 1862 and 1890 (United States Department of Education, 2010).

Online Learning: Online learning, a major subset of Distance Education, is a set of flexible teaching and learning tactics that seeks to provide greater access to learning for all students through the use of technology (University of Western Australia, 2010)

Delimitations and Limitations

This research project has both delimitations and limitations. Delimitations narrow the scope of the study and its variables, while limitations identify the inherent weaknesses in the research. The delimitations of this study include the current demands on the current and future workforce, and the impact of available jobs and future economic growth. One limitation of this study includes the amount of data available and the inability to review everything due to limited time and manpower. Another limitation is that the majority of the research was conducted in North America. Even though the argument could be made that economic success is global issue, the vast majority of the data reviewed deals with the United States and Canada.

Significance of the Study

While this study clearly has some limitations, the study still claims significance in today's world for several reasons including: 1) the change in the global economic climate is resulting in alternative needs within the United States; 2) identifying the future needs within a workforce; and 3) employers face the challenge of finding qualified people to fill roles that might not be able to be filled by a domestic workforce.

Literature Review

This review of available literature will explore the trends occurring in the United States workforce and the impact it has on higher education, using a small mid-western liberal arts college as a case study. This review of literature is divided into two sections. The first section examines the current trends of the country's work force. The second section investigates the current relationship between the adult learner and education options within institutions of higher education within the United States.

Trends in U.S. Workforce

While general economic trends may be dire, the trends for employment and earning potential are much brighter for workers who have completed one or more degrees (Bosworth, 2008). Positions will continue to be eliminated when companies automate tasks or outsource fulfillment overseas (Rampell, 2010). Many of the 8.4 million jobs lost during the recent downturn will never come back (Rampell, 2010). Degree completion will be a key advantage for job seekers even if the economy does not improve.

The value of completing an undergraduate or graduate degree can be directly connected to the number of baby boomers adults born between 1946–1964, who will begin to retire in the coming years (Bosworth, 2008). According to Reeves (2005) an estimated 76 million workers are going to retire by the end of the 2010. This will result in open positions that will not be able to be filled by the younger generation due to a lack of education and skill.

The current data reveals that the pool of workers qualified to fill emptying positions will not be sufficient to meet the needs. According to Reeves (2005), the number of workers between the ages of 35–44 will decrease by 19% while the number of workers between the ages of 45–54 will increase by 21%. Those between the ages of 55–64 will see a dramatic increase of 52% (Reeves, 2005). This approaching dearth of qualified workers will create greater demand for those who have the needed credentials and skills, potentially resulting in higher pay and a lowered risk of being dismissed (Reeves, 2005). Graduation rates at two and four-year colleges have been in state of decline over the past 20 years. Those who have been able to find employment that offered higher compensation and greater stability possess formal education and are capable of working in multiple sectors. This trend is likely to continue. Research suggests that the more education an individual has, the higher their earning potential (Bosworth, 2008). According to the U.S. Department of Labor (2010), "the higher a person's educational attainment, the more likely they will be a labor force participant and less likely to be unemployed."

As industries become more information based, the importance of hiring highly educated staff, for even the most basic of

jobs, will become an even higher priority to employers (Atcher, 2008). Entering the workforce with a college degree cannot be understated. Educational credentials will become increasingly more important as the U.S. economy continues to move from a manufacturing based economy to a more knowledge based economy.

In addition, data show that those that obtaining a Bachelor’s and Master’s degree earn more money, and will be less likely to be laid-off or terminated (Atcher, 2008). When exploring the idea of higher education, some feel that an undergraduate or graduate degree is out of reach due to cost, or wonder if the economic advantage is really there (Schneider, 2009). According to the “Trends in Higher Education Series” (2009), in 2008, the median family income for those with a bachelor’s degree or more was over \$100,000. Families with a high school diploma reported a median income of just over \$49,000. The data suggest that one’s earning potential is much higher when a four-year degree is obtained.

Table 1:
Earnings Related to Highest Degree Earned and Rates of Overall Unemployment as of 2006

Unemployment Rate (%)	Level of Education	Median Weekly Earnings (2006)
1.4	Doctorial Degree	\$1,441
1.1	Professional Degree	\$1,474
1.7	Master’s	\$1,140
2.3	Bachelor’s	\$962
3.0	A.A. Degree	\$721
3.9	Some College	\$674
4.3	HS Grad	\$595
6.8	Some HS, No Grad	\$419

Source: Bosworth, B. (2008)

Higher Education and the Adult Learner

An adult learner can look like anyone. This person could be a recent high school graduate, a grandmother, and anyone in-between. Life-long learners can look like anybody and everybody, and there is no stereotypical model. While there is no steadfast model, there are similar traits that most adult learners have in common (Donovant, 2009). The adult learner is typically somebody who requires a program that allows them the ability to balance life and educational aspirations due to a secure job or family obligation. In addition, these life-long learners are often individuals that have very limited funds (Pusser & Breneman, 2007). These two sets of circumstances are sometimes reason enough for many to feel that the idea of going back to school is out of reach. According to the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) (2000), adult learners experience numerous challenges when entering an educational program. Adult learners today have to deal with a lack of sufficient course offerings with their program of study that fits their schedule (Snyder & Tate, 2010). Since most programs cater to the traditional student, adult learners usually must find a way to attend class while working around employment schedules (Snyder & Tate, 2010).

Another issue that CAEL saw was the overall duration of a program. According to the Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics (2006), the average time it took to complete a four year degree between 1999–2000 was about 55 months, assuming students do not transfer from another institution or take any time off. Those that have attended multiple institutions took longer to complete a degree (U.S. Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics, 2006). Furthermore, these statistics are based on the traditional student that is between the ages of 18–23 years old. These do not reflect students returning for a second degree or seeking a nontraditional degree.

These are not the only roadblocks perspective and current adult learners run into in college enrollment. Additional concerns may include a lack of time to pursue education due to work and family obligation, the cost of educational courses, technology confusion among adult learners, and traditional teaching methods not serving the adult student best (Schneider & Tate, 2010).

According to Germundesn (2010), for each road block that an adult learner encounters when seeking admission to school, there is greater chance that person is to drop-out and not acquire the education desired. The study of adult learners is not a modern day focus. According to Pusser and Breneman (2007), some of this research is still valid today. For example, foundational researchers, such as Levin (1955) conducted a survey of 700 institutions and 1,500 hundred students, and an addition to a longitudinal case study consisting of 180 interviews at community colleges. This research has yielded a continuum of adult and non-traditional learner’s characteristics. These characteristics identify a given learner’s degree of failure with their secondary education. While this research is not considered valid by today’s academic standards, this does show that the history of this topic is very rich.

Levin’s 1955 continuum, according to Pusser and Breneman (2007), is still a tool that allows faculty, staff, and

administrators in the field of higher education to identify those adult learners that will most likely struggle during the course of their college education. If today's administrators, educators and staff are able to identify those learners that will most likely have problems, educators and learners are in a better position to alleviate these problems before they occur.

The Move to Online Education

In today's world of technological advancement, multiple technologies are used to deliver education to the adult learner (Milliron, 2007). According to The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (2006), distance education is described as "education or training courses delivered to remote (off-campus) locations via audio, video, or computer technologies including both synchronous and asynchronous instruction" (p. 33). Online distance education is appealing to nontraditional adult learners due to the time convenience with asynchronous learning and geographic benefits.

These benefits help adult learners who work full-time and want to further their education through continuous education (Phillippe, 2005). The demand for online education has exploded recently (Yourke & Harvey, 2005). The NCES (2006) Statistics estimated the number of adult learners over the age of 25 formally enrolled in postsecondary education was 6 million. Of those enrolled, 3,077,000 were enrolled in distance educational courses. The number of online enrollments has roughly double when compared to the 1997 enrollment of 1,632,250.

Table 2.

Online Learners over the age of 25 between 1997 – 2001



Note: Table 2 was created using information from the 2009 U.S. Census Data

While enrollment of students in adult education programs has grown, so have the dropout rates (Park & Choi, 2009). This enrollment turnover can be directly attributed to the roadblocks mentioned earlier. Institutions that provide distance education usually fail to produce data that directly calls out retention rates, but it is common knowledge within the field that the retention rates of online students are usually less than on-campus students (Beyers, 2009; Park & Choi, 2009). In addition, online courses generally see higher drop-out rates towards the start of course (Baggaley, 2009). This trend is mirrored in online programs in general; learners drop out more frequently toward the beginning of the program, not the end (Baggaley, 2009). The reason for this increased exodus towards the beginning of the course may be for multiple reasons and are unique to each individual student.

Probably the most common reason for adults enrolling in online programs is due to convenience. Seeking answers as to why students drop out may not be so easy. According to Beyers (2009) the top reasons for a student to exit a course is when a learner: 1) has a change in academic interests; 2) concludes that there is a lack of information within the course; or 3) has a lack of overall motivation to finish the coursework.

It is obvious that technology has changed, but has the student? This does not seem to be the case. Consider the foundational research of Houle (1961), this shows that adult learners can be categorized as one of three types of learner: 1) goal orientated learner, these learners use education to accomplish specific objectives; 2) activity (or social) learner, they learn because that is what has been dictated to them by societal norms; and 3) learning learner, these are learners that seek information and knowledge just because they want to. These types of learners are all similar to today's adult seeking online learning opportunities.

While there are many for profit education organizations in the market today, such as Capella, University of Phoenix, Walden University, and Kaplan, Inc. which are the most well known providers of for profit education. The existence of these institutions articulates the argument that for profit education holds a place in the field of adult education today. By looking at the revenues of these four organizations it is evident that learners, and those that hire them, find their product to be of value.

Kaplan, Inc. offers associate's degrees and bachelor's degrees, as well as a law degree (Kaplan, 2010). Kaplan is traditionally known for their various test preparation guides, not for extended education programs, even though Kaplan came in to the field of distance education in 1937 (Kaplan, 2010). Today, Kaplan is active within many facets of education while being recognized by accreditation bodies like the Higher Learning Commission as well as the North Central Association of Colleges (Kaplan, 2010). In addition to test preparation guides, today Kaplan offers services in the

areas of higher education, English and global learning, an online high school, and other areas of learning.

Kaplan is a growing organization. As of June 30, 2010, Kaplan's student population was 112,000 students. These students are spread across 80 campuses in 19 states and through online services (Lewin, 2010). Kaplan's nine academic programs and law school produced \$212 million in income through the first half of 2010 (Lewin, 2010). Kaplan is currently owned by the Washington Post Company and is responsible for roughly 80% of the company's overall operating income during the first half of 2010 (Lewin, 2010).

Walden University, another well known source of online learning for adults, is another organization that boasts great demand within the educational market. Walden, founded in 1970, has a current student population of 42,500 students in all 50 states and over 100 countries worldwide (Walden University, 2010). Walden offers seven separate curricula in education, counseling and social services, health science, management, nursing, psychology and public administration (Walden, 2010). Walden also offers a wide range of degree options (Bachelor's, Master's, and Doctorate Degrees), certificates, industry certification programs as well individual course offerings (Walden, 2010). Walden, just like many of the schools discussed in this paper, is accredited through a governing body, the National Coalition of Alternative Community Schools (NCACS). Current enrollment figures are not available as Walden is part of the Laureate Corporation, a multi-conglomerate, multinational, privately held organization.

The Apollo Group, owners of the University of Phoenix, is the unequivocal market leader when it comes to for-profit education (Apollo Group, 2007). According to the University of Phoenix website, it was founded in 1976 with the idea to make education more accessible. The University of Phoenix offers many programs in an online format. In addition to online learning, the University of Phoenix has campuses in 41 states offering classes in four to eight week increments. In 2009, this university's net income was \$4 billion (Apollo, 2010). In addition, their total enrollment consisted of 420,700 students (Apollo, 2010). To put these numbers in perspective, in 2004 the University of Phoenix received close to \$1.8 billion dollars in federal grants (Mangu-Ward, 2008). Since University of Phoenix does not apply to receive research grants, the entire \$1.8 billion is connected to students enrolled in the program (Mangu-Ward, 2008). The University of Phoenix is the single largest recipient of education grants in the nation (Mangu-Ward, 2008).

Capella Education Company (Capella, 2009) was founded in 1991 and only offers online post-secondary education course. This for-profit institution is accredited by The Higher Learning Commission, and offers numerous doctoral, master's and bachelor's degree programs online. Capella has been able to attract students, mostly adults, based on their academic offerings that combine competency-based curriculum with the convenience and flexibility of an online learning format (Capella, 2007).

As of October 2010, Capella had roughly 38,000 students enrolled, with the average student age of 29 (Capella, 2010). The most commonly sought after credentials are Master's and Doctorate's degrees (Capella, 2007). Since being founded in 2003, Capella has seen a steady rise in revenue and enrollment. In 2006, their overall revenue topped out at \$179.9 million, which represents a 20% increase when compared with 2006's revenues of \$149.2 million (Capella, 2007).

Accreditation is what provides value to for-profit education programs. Without a third-party accreditation, for-profit institutions would find themselves at a disadvantage when learners compare non-accredited programs to accredited for-profits, or traditional, nonprofit, schools (U.S. News and World Reports, 2010). Receiving accreditation is considered a business objective for many for-profits; without this, they are sure to fail (Ruch, 2008). Furthermore, there is no reason for for-profits to not meet accreditation standards. If the institution meets or exceeds published standards, it is hard for accreditation bodies to deny them certification (Ruch, 2008).

Case Study: The College of St. Scholastica

The College of St. Scholastica (CSS), was founded in 1912 in Duluth, MN. CSS holds accreditations from multiple third-party accreditation bodies including the Accreditation Council for Occupational Therapy Education, Commission on Accreditation in Physical Therapy Education, Commission on Accreditation of Health Informatics and Information Management Education (CAHIIM), Commission on Collegiate Nursing Education, Council on Social Work Education, Minnesota Board of Nursing, Minnesota Board of Teaching, National League for Nursing, Board of Accreditation of the American Society of Exercise Physiologists, Higher Learning Commission, Teacher Education Accreditation Council. CSS's top five majors consist of management, nursing, computer science, education, and biology. There are currently 161 full-time instructors and 120 part-time instructors, with the majority of full-time faculty holding terminal degrees within their field of study. CSS offers a relatively small class sizes with a 14:1 student to faculty ratio, with the average class size of 22 students. Overall, CSS has roughly 2,821 full-time students and 271 part-time students, with 70% of CSS students being female (Minnesota's Private Colleges, 2010). The current student population at CSS can be illustrated in two ways, geographic origin as well as by racial ethnicity. The majority of CSS's students (35%) come from the Twin Cities area with 34% coming from greater outstate Minnesota (The College of St. Scholastica, 2010). The remaining students come from Duluth (17%), other parts of the country (10%), as well as foreign countries (4%) (College of St. Scholastica, 2010). The overwhelming majority of students at CSS are White (85%) (The College of St. Scholastica, 2010). The remaining diversity of the population is made up of those from other countries (3%), Black/African American (2%), American Indian (2%), Asian (2%) and finally Hispanic (1%) (The College of St. Scholastica, 2010).

To capture the non-traditional, adult learning market CSS created the Accelerated Degree Evening Program (ADEP). Since 1999 the ADEP has been known as the School of Extended Studies (Higher Learning Commission, 2010). This program offers four-year degrees to evening students that may be completed in three years, while attending class two nights per week. The main CSS campus in Duluth does offer traditional undergraduate and graduate degree programs, also offers the on-ground and online accelerate learning model within selected programs such as business, health information management, information technology leadership and education. While each School of Extended Studies location does not offer on-ground graduate programs, each location is able to offer graduate programs online. This allows each location to increase program offerings to their geographic location and beyond.

As previously mentioned, CSS is moving slowly to the online environment. The CSS School of Extended Studies program has several programs and courses available to online learners. According to the CSS website (2010) there are close to eight separate online programs that fall within the accelerated format, these programs include: Registered Nurse to Bachelor of Science (RN to BS), Transitional Doctor of Physical Therapy (tDPT), B.S. and M.S. in Health Information Management (HIM), M.A. in Information Technology Leadership (ITL), M.S. in HIM and ITL (dual degree), Master of Education and an M.S. in Educational Media and Technology (The College of St. Scholastica, 2010).

In an effort to provide a CSS education to others within the Minnesota, CSS has expanded offerings that were under the ADEP model (The College of St. Scholastica, 2008). This expansion resulted in the creation of multiple campuses in locations other than Duluth. Today, students can find a CSS campus in Duluth, Brainerd, St. Cloud, St. Paul and Rochester. Currently, Duluth, St. Cloud and St. Paul are the only locations offering both on-ground Bachelor's and online and on-ground Master's degrees, with the remaining only offering on-ground Bachelor's degrees and on-line master's degrees. CSS is attempting to fill a need within each market. Currently, Brainerd residents have very little opportunity to enroll in a 4-year program, other than Hibbing Community College or online options (MnSCU, 2010). According to the Minnesota Department of Commerce (2010), Crow Wing County, where Brainerd is located, has 62,723 residents (Brainerd Fact Sheet, 2010); of those only 1,951 residents registered in some type of post-secondary option. In addition, 86.3% of residents over the age of 25 hold a high school degree or higher, with 18.4% of residents over 25 holding a bachelor's degree or higher (Brainerd Fact Sheet, 2010). This demographic data illustrates a need for post-secondary education to those that are still living within the northern region of Minnesota.

The CSS St. Cloud campus opened in the Bremer Office building in 2002. St. Cloud is located in Stearns County. According to the Stearns County Fact Sheet (2010), Stearns County has a population of 148,955 with 15,315 residents currently enrolled within a post-secondary institution, of which 86.2% of those over the age of 25 holding a high school degree or higher and 22% holding a bachelor's degree or higher (Stearns County Fact Sheet, 2010). These high levels of education can be attributed to the undergraduate population of St. Cloud State University, as well as St. Cloud Technical College. Stearns County is centrally located state that consists of a growing economy and population due to new business and industries like education and health care (Stearns County Fact Sheet, 2010).

The CSS St. Paul campus opened in the Downtown University Club building in 2000 (Higher Learning Commission). Ramsey County, where St. Paul is located is a region of the state that is highly populated with 506,278 residents (Ramsey County Fact Sheet, 2010). Eighty-seven percent of those 25 years old and over hold a high school degree or higher and, 34.3% hold a bachelor's degree or higher (Ramsey County Fact Sheet, 2010). St. Paul is home to many businesses in the private sector, as well as local, state, regional and federal government agencies. In addition to industry, St. Paul and Ramsey County have many opportunities for post-secondary education. When looking at just the public post-secondary options within Ramsey County, there are more than five public two- and four-year schools within Ramsey County (MnSCU, 2010). This number doubles when considering the neighboring county of Hennepin. In addition to public schools, private for-profit and not-for-profit four-years schools are well represented with Ramsey County (Minnesota's Private Colleges, 2010). There are 17 private schools within Minnesota; six of those schools fall within Ramsey County (Minnesota's Private Colleges, 2010). It is easy to see why CSS picked St. Paul for a campus when considering the demographic data.

The CSS Rochester campus opened within the Rochester Central Lutheran property in 2006 (Higher Learning Commission, 2010) Rochester, located in Olmsted County, is a city with a great deal of industry, specifically within the field of health care. Rochester is the home of Mayo Clinic, Mayo School of Medicine and Public Health, multiple government organizations as well as other public and private organizations (City of Rochester, 2010). An opportunity for post-secondary education is high within Olmsted County and in Rochester specifically. Currently, St. Mary's University of Minnesota (St. Mary's University, 2010), Winona State University (Winona State University, 2010), University of Minnesota (University of Minnesota, 2010) and Rochester Community and Technical College (Rochester Community and Technical College, 2010) all have campuses within Rochester.

Olmsted County has a population of 143,962 with 6,285 residents currently enrolled within post-secondary education (Olmsted County Fact Sheet, 2010). In addition, 91.1% of the current population over the age of 25 holds a high school degree or higher (Olmsted County Fact Sheet, 2010). Thirty-seven percent of this population holds a bachelor's degree or higher (Olmsted County Fact Sheet, 2010). Rochester has such a high number of sources of education, a hub of health care innovation as well as a highly educated workforce. It is easy to see why CSS would have chosen Rochester as a site for extended learning.

In addition to Bachelor's, Master's and Doctorate degrees, CSS also offers more than ten online certificate programs (The College of St. Scholastica, 2010). While certificates generally require less time and money to complete than an undergraduate, graduate and doctorate degree, these certificates do have a place within the landscape of continuing education. Potential students see certificates as beneficial due to reduced time and costs. Institutions, like CSS, see these certificate programs in a positive light as well. With certificate programs, there are less structural costs associated with online courses. While online courses require great technological investments, less is needed for brick and mortar structures demanded by traditional model of education.

While there can be less cost associated to the creation and maintenance of physical structures, the investment needed to implement or upgrade already existing technology is not without cost. Currently, the average cost to implement or upgrade Blackboard 9.1 is roughly \$75,000 to \$100,000; sometimes more, depending upon the number of users needing to access the interface (Blackboard, 2010). In September of 2010, CSS completed their upgrade from Blackboard 9.0 to 9.1, signaling a conscious effort in making CSS a more technologically advance institution, focusing on students' ability to access information pertinent to course work from any location, any time of the day (Anguelo, 2010). While it is unknown how many other programs use this model, this is one example of how the ADEP option is being implemented in an adult program (The College of St. Scholastica, 2010).

Analysis

Demand is Key to Future Success

The need and demand for distance education can be directly connected to the number of baby boomers that will be retiring in the coming years (Bosworth, 2008). According to Forbes Magazine (2005), 76 million workers were going to retire by the end of this decade. This will result in open positions that will not be able to be filled by the younger generation due to a lack of education and skill.

The recent economic growth, which began in the 1980's, can be directly attributed to the push for education within the U.S. workforce (Bosworth, 2008). In addition, this overall increase in the demand for education can be attributed to the baby boomer era (Bosworth, 2008). Currently there are roughly 120 million working adults between the ages of 25–64; 62 million of those have no postsecondary experience of any kind (Bosworth, 2008). These 62 million individuals represent an opportunity to tap a previously unrecognized group of future talent where distance education may be the best option for them to get an education.

The number of qualified workers is decreasing. According to Reeves (2005), workers between the ages of 35–44 will decrease by a total of 19% while workers between the ages of 45–54 will increase by 21%. Furthermore, those between the ages of 55–64 will see a dramatic increase of 52% (Reeves, 2005). One can only conclude that there will not enough qualified personnel available to fill these positions. Some say that is a good thing considering the economy; however there may be concern as to what will happen when those between the ages of 35–44 reach retirement age.

Since the population of workers between the ages of 25–30 is decreasing (Bosworth, 2008), one must understand that these numbers are based off of those that are native to the US; these numbers do not take in to affect those that are immigrating to the US from other parts of the world. It is no secret that the next generation will be far more diverse (racially and ethnically) than previous generations (Bosworth, 2008). In the past, recent immigrants to the United States have failed to receive adequate education in the K–12 systems, not to mention post-secondary institutions (Bosworth, 2008). It is possible that this trend will continue in the future.

As of 2000, African Americans were two times less likely to obtain a four-year degree when compared to Whites; Hispanics were three times less likely (Bosworth, 2008). Furthermore, the proportion of Whites within the general population will drop to 63% by 2020; this illustrates the need to address this issue (Bosworth, 2008). Lastly, the graduation rate for two and four year colleges has seen a decline over the last 20 years. The previous statistical information only points to an overall decline in work force and levels of education, it is easy to see why those that are able to find employment are educated and capable of working in the industries that require a formal education. While the cost of education continues to raise, the data in Table 1 show that the more education an individual has, the higher is their lifetime earning potential.

Some politicians and educators want to find and implement a legislated solution and quickly. The challenge is to educate a large number of people without lowering academic standards in the process (Donovant, 2009). Some, like former Education Secretary Lamar Alexander feel that the most cost effective way to educate incoming freshman is to offer students a four-year degree in three years (Alexander, 2009). However, this suggestion fails to address the overwhelming need to educate the adult learner.

While Alexander's option is not directed at the adult learner, this is an option being implemented in some schools with the hope of educating the adult with work and family responsibilities. The need to educate adults is an issue that cannot be ignored. As baby boomers come closer to retirement, it is imperative that a solution is implemented to better prepare new workers for positions vacated by this retiring generation. The challenge will be to do it in a manner that is effective, useful, and convenient to the adult learner.

Today's Options

Previous areas of this paper have illustrated the need for deliberate, open sources of education for those over the age of 25. This portion of the paper will articulate the role online education is playing in filling these very specific needs.

As technology advances so do the options for online education. A simple Google search of the term "online learning" in October, 2010 yielded over 169 million pages to choose from. It is impossible to tell how many online schools are available to a learner in the United States today. This is due to the fact that new schools are popping up all over the Internet today, some of these schools fail to have the same accreditation as traditional schools, and this leaves them unable to be tracked (Germundsen, 2009). However, it is known that between 2001 and 2009 enrollment in online education has grown 832 percent, from 229,363 to 2,139,714 (US News and World Reports, 2010).

It is possible however to estimate how many individual learners are using distance education as a source of education. Between for-profit education, non-profit education and corporate learning programs, it is estimated that in 2005 there were roughly 35 million people utilizing distance education, with each of those 35 million utilizing the web in their learning at one point in time (Bates, 2005).

According to Larreamendy-Joerns and Leinhardt (2006) the top-ranked institutions in the country are actively offering online options to their students. For example, Yale, Columbia, London School of Economics, MIT, and the University of Chicago are all offering a significant number of courses online. In fact, Columbia has created an online education completely devoted to business and administration (Larreamendy-Joerns and Leinhardt, 2006). With such well known institutions embracing the era of distance education, it may somehow make it more acceptable for other institutions to seriously look to the web as a legitimate source of learning.

Those that were at the forefront of distance education are continuing to offer courses during this technological age, like the University of Wisconsin-Extension (UW-Ex). Today, UW-Ex offers over 70 graduate and undergraduate courses online in addition to the number of courses that are offered by traditional programs at the University of Wisconsin (University of Wisconsin, 2010).

Not only are traditional educational institutions seeing the potential value in online education, but general industry is also realizing its value (Bashham, 2008). More and more organizations are providing online learning tools to their employees (Belanger, 2008). Large organizations such as Sun Microsystems, Toyota, and Motorola have embraced the idea of a "corporate university." Organizations have seen the value in educating employees due to the lack of quality staff available in the workforce (Brumbach, 2005). There are many benefits to internal training within organization, the biggest being the low cost. Some organizations find it cheaper to provide education to existing employees when compared with the costs of hiring and training new staff (Torraco, 2008). Organizations see that competent employees are hard to obtain and that retention efforts should be made.

While not all employee education programs are for college credit some are. For example, Hamburger University by McDonald's provides course work that has been approved for college credit, by the American Council on Education (ACE). According to McDonald's, ACE has certified 46 credits of Hamburger University's curriculum for college credit. These college credits can be transferred to a two- or four-year institution for college credit. This credentialing adds great validity McDonald's employee education program (McDonalds University, 2009).

Donavant (2006) explored the efficacy of online education and traditional education in the field of professional development with the overall purpose of this research determining what method of learning yielded the greatest results. Donavant concluded that traditional methods of education should not be discarded and online modes of education should not be 100% embraced. The research showed that even though the majority of volunteered studied enjoyed online education, the vast majority of respondents preferred traditional education when asked to choose. Donavant (2009) went on to conclude that the best way to educate others would be for organizations to bring a mix of options to the learner. Donavant's conclusions may not prove accurate for all employee learning programs, but programs will prove successful if the learner is intrinsically driven and motivated to learn. In short, motivated learners will make the program successful.

Online learning has not only changed the way industry is teaching employees, but it has changed the landscape of online education as a whole. Today, online learning has increased with for-profit education sources. Capella University, University of Phoenix, Walden and Kaplan are the four leaders in for-profit, online education (Nadeau, 2010). For-profit institutions do provide education, but when compared to nonprofit education, they are vastly different (Nadeau, 2010). The definition of nonprofit education, according to Ruch (2008) is an educational institution that is run by private, profit-seeking companies or organizations. The need to understand the definition should not be minimized. For-profit education exists to make a profit, whereas the traditional college and university systems may strive to make a profit. However if non-profits do not, it is likely that the doors will stay open. The differences between these two models do not stop at the definition. For-profit schools have investors, nonprofit institutions have donors. For-profit have, and need, investment capital, traditional schools have endowments. For-profits are taxed, and traditional schools are not (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). The differences illustrated by these examples are great. The 1990's proved to be the time when for-profits saw the most growth (Ruch, 2008). From 1990-2000, for-profit degree granting universities grew from 350

campuses to 750; an increase of 112%. In the same time period, more than 200 nonprofit universities closed (Ruch, 2008).

Some of the institutions that followed the traditional model most likely found themselves in situations of financial despair for a variety of reasons. Some of the reasons that can be attributed to their failure most likely stem from the institution's program offerings, delivery methods, program quality, the school's overall lack of vision of the future, as well as many other others. At the root of any university is the fact that they are a business. Colleges and Universities need students (customers) to keep the school going. Just like any other business, if students are not attracted to enroll, and stay, within the school/program, the overall organization will fail and ultimately collapse.

This fear of lowered enrollment numbers effect some institutions more than other. When looking at a college or university, it is important to understand if the organization is a public or private institution. When looking at public universities like a state school, that school focuses not only on enrollment numbers, but also state aid. Private institutions on the other hand, in addition to enrollment data, must focus on the organizations overall charitable endowment. Both models must keep track of enrollment data, but private schools generally have a greater need for new students when compared to public schools.

When looking at CSS, it is important to understand that this is a private school that requires high enrollment numbers in order to fund future growth throughout the organization. Just as any business, universities need a high volume of customers, if future growth can be expected. For CSS to continue to provide the service of education, CSS must continue to evaluate and implement new programs and policies that will attract and retain students. When looking at the current structure of CSS it can be noted that there are many strengths in the organization. CSS is currently offering degrees and programs that are popular to the market. Some include a numerous undergraduate programs, but also degree and certificate programs focused on the adult learner looking to continue their education (MBA, GTL, RNBS). Other strengths of the school include positive public image, high marks for quality (U.S. News and World Reports, 2010), an expansive alumni base (The College of St. Scholastica, 2010), and industry recognized programs like HIM.

As with any organization, CSS does hold some points of weakness as well. Currently, CSS has strong name recognition within the immediate geographic region where campuses exist, allowing for the great undergraduate brand recognition. While immediate regional brand recognition is strong, the recognition is not as high within the rest of the market. Additional weaknesses include their infancy within some of the markets of offered programs, such as the MBA. CSS's Master of Arts in Management (MAM) program has been in existence for over 20 years, the MBA program has been in existence for less than 5 years. When compared to other organizations like St. Thomas, University of Minnesota, St. Mary's University of Minnesota or even smaller state schools like Minnesota State University, Mankato; CSS' most universally understood degree, the MBA, is also the youngest. CSS is currently in a time of great opportunity. As the market becomes more conditioned to online learning, CSS may see additional growth in diversifying their program offerings by offering course work in three styles, on-ground, online and hybrid of online and on-ground. By offering alternative formats, CSS would be able to offer a format of preference to the entire market, taking program-delivery out of the decision making process of the perspective student. There are some programs that have one format or the other, but very few are offered in all three formats.

When looking at the MBA program specifically, competition is already beginning from programs like Capella University, University of Phoenix, Walden University and Kaplan that offering online MBAs. These programs are growing, but a number of traditional schools are not following this lead. As of October 2010, there are no traditional, non-profit schools in Minnesota offering a 100% online MBA. However, there are traditional, for-profit schools offering 100% online degrees. Schools like Minnesota School of Business/Globe College are filling this demand within the market. While the reasons for this are not clear, this realization shows that one of two things might be happening: 1) traditional institutions are not fully believing this change in format design or 2) the traditional models are not able to adapt to market changes, even when there is a desire to adapt. Either way, the 100% online delivery-method can be considered an opportunity to CSS.

An opportunity for potential growth is the expansion within the area of terminal degrees. Currently, CSS is only offering terminal degrees in the areas of nursing and physical therapy. With public institutions continuing to propagate a highly competitive selection process based on standardized test scores, past academic and professional work experience, there is a demand from students and opportunity for schools to accommodate this market need. This is evident when looking at the University of Phoenix and their enrollment figures. Their fastest growing areas include their doctorate degrees.

The largest threat to CSS comes from those schools (for-profit and not-for-profit) that offer a full suite of educational opportunities online. This threat can be articulated through the previously mentioned data. The future profile of learners is dramatically changing, even at the most basic level. Today, high schools are offering online learning. If this delivery method does gain momentum at the high school level, the learning habits of future post-secondary learners will obviously change, resulting in the traditional colleges needing to adapt to this potential. The best way to adapt to these future learners is to adopt more diverse delivery methods.

Overall, the competitive set for CSS can be found in not just one geographic market, but throughout the entire State of Minnesota. Each market, online (Duluth, Rochester, St. Cloud and Brainerd) is faced with competition from both

traditional and non-traditional institutions. As discussed earlier, CSS is faced with online competition from online institutions like Walden, University of Phoenix, Kaplan and Capella, but also from other more traditional, regionally well known four-year schools like University of Minnesota-Twin Cities, University of Minnesota-Duluth, University of Minnesota-Rochester, just to name a few. Within the Minnesota State Colleges and University System (MnSCU) there are a total of 32 institutions within MnSCU of which 25 of those are two year colleges (MnSCU, 2010). In addition, there are 16 private liberal arts colleges, not including CSS, located throughout Minnesota (Minnesota Private Colleges, 2010). Between private and public non-profit schools within Minnesota, there are 48 separate general competitors of CSS. These competitive institutions do not include the industry leaders within online education; if included, this number would be well over 50 competitors.

With these numerous competitors, CSS is in the unique situation of having to battle against message external messages while trying to define what their own niche may be. Historically, CSS has been known as a strong school for education and health care (The College of St. Scholastica, 2010) but now is found to be in a situation where there they are battling for the same business students as Hamline and University of Minnesota. As time goes on, CSS will be able to compete more with the more well known programs around the state. Until then, CSS must try to solidify their position within the market, whatever the position may be.

Prescriptions and Conclusions

What seems to be the overwhelming issue regarding online education is the quality surrounding the degree. The discussion of quality is nothing new. This has been an issue since Pittman introduced the first correspondence class in 1840 (Chaney, 2009). It is safe to say that all stakeholders (students, government, administrators, and instructors) want to provide the highest quality education when providing online learning, in order for these programs to be successful quality assurance is a must (Chaney, 2009).

Research suggests that for online learning to be effective there needs to be continual interaction between the student and others (Chaney, 2009). The interaction can often happen one of two ways: (a) student to student, or (b) student to instructor. Chaney found that student to instructor interaction was most often cited as an important component in a student's personal gauge of success and overall feedback (Chaney, 2009).

Additional indicators of a quality online education are the implementation of active learning techniques. This method of instruction has been found to be effective in the classroom and online (Chaney, 2009). It is clear that if learners actively demonstrate the information they are trying to retain, the learning process is far more effective. This also shows enthusiasm for the information and topic. When learners show enthusiasm, it is more likely they will retain the information (Chaney, 2009). The last indicator of a quality online experience is prompt feedback. To keep learners engaged, students need and expect prompt feedback, the same prompt feedback they would receive if they were in the classroom (Chaney, 2009). The feedback from instructors engages the student and employs dialogue between the instructor and the student, or even the entire class (Chaney, 2009). A lack of instructor presence is a leading complaint when discussing online learning programs (Knightly, 2007). To avoid this, it is advised that students and instructors define expectations early (Chaney, 2009). By providing prompt feedback, instructors are making their presence known.

According to Moore of the Center for Applied Linguistics (2009), the best way to apply online learning is to promote the idea of group work. This brings adult learners together so that they can learn as a team and not as individuals. In addition, the student's interaction will mostly enhance the program and learning experience. Another learning tactic online instructors need to take in to consideration is the curriculum and its usability online (Moore, 2009).

By looking at the history of distance education and evaluating the needs of an adult learner, it can be concluded that distance education still has a place in the field of adult education through nonprofit and for-profit institutions as well as through general industry. The field of distance education for adult learners is experiencing growth due to the need and desire for online education. The future of online education is infinite in possibilities and will only see maturity based off of technology and human imagination. Online education will continue to prove valuable because of the learner's ability to access information 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Online education could prove to be a failure if adult learners discontinue their quest for further knowledge. However, with such a large percentage of the U.S. population lacking a college degree, and with a looming decrease in workforce as baby boomers retire, this quest for knowledge and formal education must and will continue. Now more than ever, adult educators must embrace distance education as they work to create educational and training opportunities for adult learners.

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