

Bringing Adults Back to College: Designing and Implementing a Statewide Concierge Model



State policymakers are continuously searching for ways to upgrade their state's human capital so they can develop their workforce, improve their economy, and ensure the political and social well-being of their citizens. At the same time, demographics are shifting, financial pressures are mounting, and everyone from the nation's president to our states' governors, as well as business and private foundations, are underscoring the need to boost degree attainment to meet the demands of the changing global economy.

To meet the challenges before them, state and institutional higher education leaders are realizing the necessity of serving adult students, particularly those who already have some college experience. Notably, those with some college but no degree comprise over 20 percent of the nation's adult population (25 years and older).¹ Successfully reaching and serving these potential students – known as “ready adults,” “near completers,” or “stop-outs” – is one important component of an effective strategy for increasing degree attainment.

With funding from Lumina Foundation for Education, the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) has been working closely with six states – Arkansas, Colorado, Nevada, New Jersey, North Dakota, and South Dakota – to identify those who have earned a substantial number of college credits but have yet to return to college and remove the barriers that have kept them from completing their degrees. The project, called *Non-traditional No More: Policy Solutions for Adult Learners*, involves policymakers and leaders at both the state and institutional levels and has resulted in many valuable lessons that can be useful to those interested in better serving this group of potential students. This comprehensive effort includes mining state data systems and forging relationships and agreements with public and private partners to identify each state's ready adults. By building degree pathways, states focus on identifying and eliminating barriers in academic affairs, financial aid/financing, and student support services, while developing effective communications strategies designed to reach out to their ready adult population and draw them back to postsecondary education.



A Concierge for Students

Helping those who left college with a substantial number of credits but no degree can be a highly efficient means of increasing a state's degree production. These individuals have already demonstrated that they can succeed by amassing significant credits. With the right guidance, and a clear path to a degree, they often can complete their studies relatively quickly.

Over the course of the *Non-traditional No More* project, several states identified the reenrollment process as a major barrier for ready adults. Adults interested in reenrolling often get lost in the shuffle of a process that tends to be dominated by traditional students. Too often, they are steered toward several different offices and departments within an institution. Further, many of these individuals may have earned credits from multiple institutions and have difficulty getting clear answers about how their credits will transfer and how to efficiently complete their degrees. Combined with an underlying feeling of anxiety surrounding their return to campus, these stumbling blocks can be enough to prevent them from ever actually reentering a classroom.

What Is a Ready Adult Concierge?

A ready adult (or reentry) concierge is a single-point of contact at a college or university who helps returning adult students navigate the application, enrollment, and registration processes and overcome barriers to college success. Larger institutions may have an office to which all ready adults turn, whether they are prospective or current students. The concierge also helps institutions and systems identify areas where change can help minimize or remove the barriers that students face.

Policymakers and institutional leaders in Nevada have devised a solution to better serve these students at this critical juncture, borrowing the idea of a concierge from the state's tourism industry. Each institution has an individual (or an office at the larger institutions) who is trained to help ready adults navigate the application, enrollment, and registration process in the same way that a hotel concierge assists its guests in finding activities or restaurants that suit their needs or interests. These "ready adult concierges" may not be able to directly solve every issue faced by potential students, but they can help guide them to the appropriate office, work with institutional colleagues to address issues raised by students, and help institutions eliminate unnecessary burdens and obstacles that can prevent these individuals from reenrolling and earning degrees.

To better understand the barriers faced by students in the reenrollment process and how the Concierge Model can help potential students reengage and earn a degree, WICHE recently collaborated with the Nevada System of Higher Education to convene a meeting of staff from each of the seven public institutions who serve as the campus concierge. During the meeting, the concierges shared successful ideas, discussed common challenges and remaining barriers for ready adults, and suggested ideas for other states looking to implement a similar model.



Barriers Facing Ready Adults

Throughout the *Non-traditional No More* project, state policymakers and institutional leaders have identified numerous barriers that make it more difficult for ready adults to come back to college and complete their degrees. The concierges echoed some of the challenges and provided additional insight into the obstacles that students often face. The Concierge Model is helping to address some of these challenges, including the following.

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- 1. Financial aid concerns.** Without a support system in place – such as the one that guides high school students in the financial aid process – ready adults may find it hard to understand the different options available to them. Knowledgeable campus concierges can answer many of the potential student's questions or, if they do not know the answer, find it out from someone who does.
 - 2. Complexity of the reenrollment process.** Students, especially non-traditional students with previous college credit, must navigate a complex process to reenroll in postsecondary education. Completing this process quickly and effectively can make ready adults much more likely to complete a degree. Having a single point of contact to guide the student makes the process more efficient and makes it more likely that the student will actually return to campus to complete a degree.
 - 3. Class scheduling and alternative delivery modes.** Most ready adults have outside commitments, such as work and family, and need flexible course scheduling and alternative delivery modes. Concierges can help potential students understand the different options for completing courses, including taking online courses, enrolling in classes at night or on weekends, or taking a course at another institution.
 - 4. Transcript issues.** Ready adults often have transcripts from multiple institutions or credits that are old or outdated. They sometimes have trouble getting information about how those credits will apply if they reenroll because many institutions will not evaluate a potential student's credits until after he or she enrolls, leading to uncertainty about how much time, effort, and money he or she will have to devote to earning a degree. Further, this can make the decision about which institution to attend more difficult because he or she does not have full information prior to applying. While some institutions offer lists of the courses that have been accepted for credit in the past, much of the decision-making authority remains with academic departments. While concierges cannot offer a definitive answer about whether a particular course might be accepted for credit, they can help ready adults better understand the process and likelihood of course transfer.



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5. **Anxiety and fear.** Having been away from postsecondary education for some time, many ready adults are anxious or intimidated about returning to college. Having a single point of contact or office can build a relationship that helps foster success. Even though the concierges do not always have a mandate to remain the key contact once a student is enrolled, several in Nevada reported that they maintain their relationship with students throughout their college experience and continue to provide assistance and support through graduation. One concierge said that when ready adults have someone available to listen to them and try to answer their questions, it is often enough to help them stay enrolled.
 6. **Prior learning assessment.** The concierges in Nevada reported that many ready adults are interested in assessing their college-level learning gained from work, life, and volunteer experiences through formal assessment processes. While policies for granting credit may vary among institutions, the concierge can help the potential student understand what has been granted to others in similar situations as well as what academic programs (if any) may be most beneficial to students looking to apply work experience and/or transfer credits.

Through *Non-Traditional No More*, state and institutional leaders identified additional barriers related to data, academic affairs, student services, finance and financial aid, and communications. Upcoming policy briefs focus on these issues as well as on the creative approaches states are taking to address them.

Framework for Implementing the Ready Adult Concierge Model

The Nevada System of Higher Education implemented its Concierge Model over a year ago, and its experience has provided a blueprint for other states that want to apply a similar strategy.

1. **Conduct “secret shopper” activities at your institutions.** Begin by conducting “secret shopper” activities to get a sense of what a ready adult who is interested in returning to your state’s institutions might experience. Call the main telephone number at your institutions and tell them that you have a significant number of college credits and would like to explore your options for coming back. See where you are directed and how these calls are handled. Are you directed to individual departments, admissions, the registrar’s office? Can the person who answers the phone address common questions that a ready adult might have? Next, surf your institutions’ Websites. Do you notice differences between the two- and four-year institutions? Compare these Websites to those of for-profit institutions that serve students in your state. This type of



Engaging Adult Students

Adult students may initially feel lost or out of place when they first come back to campus. To help alleviate some of these fears, the University of Nevada-Las Vegas (UNLV) created a handbook designed specifically for non-traditional students called the *Rebel Ready Guide*. It offers a variety of resources and tools for returning adults.

Returning adults also may find it difficult to build the type of informal support network that can be invaluable in earning a degree, given that it might feel like most students are many years younger and come directly from high school. At Western Nevada College, the non-traditional student concierge started *Campus Connect*, a club that supports non-traditional students. The club meets weekly and offers a short learning component on a variety of topics, such as applying for financial aid, followed by informal networking and discussions. Although the concierge started the program, the students have now taken ownership and help develop content and publicize meetings. The club is now sanctioned by the college, which provides some funding for materials.

activity can help to identify weaknesses in the system as you begin to plan the implementation of the Concierge Model.

2. **Hold a meeting of the key decision makers at each institution.** States have different governance structures, political climates, and varying degrees of authority over their institutions, and those interested in implementing this model need to consider and operate within these constraints. Experience in Nevada suggests that an initial meeting or discussion about the necessity of serving ready adults and the promise of adopting the Concierge Model will increase the chances for institutional buy-in and ultimate success. Concierges need the support of institutional leaders and others in order to be effective. Once the decision has been made to adopt the Concierge Model, there may be some anxiety about how to implement it when lay-offs and cut-backs are common at most institutions. Nevada is facing one of the most difficult fiscal situations in the country yet it has been successful in implementing the model, demonstrating that it can be done even in the absence of excess resources. Institutions can select their concierges in whatever way best suits their context. They do not necessarily need to be a new hire, although they could be. In most cases, institutions in Nevada reorganized advising responsibilities to accommodate the ready adult.
3. **Develop an internal communications effort to ensure that everyone at the institution knows about the concierge.** Institutional leaders need to inform everyone about the concierge and establish internal communications processes so that all ready adults are directed toward the appropriate person. The concierge needs to be part of the institutional culture and supported by the institution's leadership. One college cited an incremental approach by which the concierge was able to first experience some success with students before marketing the availability of the concierge campuswide. This provided the opportunity to create necessary buy-in from faculty and others on campus. Whether opting for a top-down or an incremental approach to implementation, institutions need to develop an internal communications plan.
4. **Track student success.** Providing the necessary academic and student services to ready adults is critical as they initially return to campus, as well as once they enroll. But ultimately, states and institutions need to know whether the adults eventually complete their degrees. If not already in place, institutions need to establish a process for collecting and analyzing data to monitor the progress of ready adults so they can make necessary adjustments along the way to ensure the academic success of this population.



5. **Establish a process to allow concierges to influence institutional policy and practice.** While the primary purpose of the ready adult concierge is to help students navigate the path to a college degree, they should be empowered to be more than a band-aid over institutional barriers. Establishing a process by which the concierge can provide feedback to decision makers about obstacles that may be addressed through institutional policy changes is beneficial to students as well as to the institution and helps lead to a more efficient degree path for future ready adults coming back to college.
6. **Hold annual or biannual meetings of the concierges.** This last step serves two purposes. First, the concierges who are working with these students on a daily basis can provide a wealth of information to the state and institution about barriers facing ready adults. For instance, there may be a policy in place that unintentionally presents a significant barrier to students, and state-level decision makers may not even realize it. If made aware of the problem by the concierges, state policymakers can make a change and remedy the situation. Second, these meetings provide a forum for professional development and networking for the concierges. Given that they are by definition single points of contact at an institution, they will benefit from the exchange of information with other professionals who serve in this capacity at other institutions.

Characteristics of a Successful Ready Adult Concierge

A successful ready adult concierge is:

- **Student-oriented.** The concierge must help students navigate the entire process of returning to college. The concierge must be willing to direct potential students to the institution that makes the most sense for them, whether or not that's the one he or she works for. This requires support from the institution and often necessitates a change in mindset. While the Concierge Model is often a recruiting tool, concierges must remember that they exist to serve the students, not just the institution.
- **Accessible.** The concierge should be reachable by phone and email, and through in-person visits. Importantly, there should be a mechanism for ready adults to contact this person after standard business hours as many ready adults also are employed.
- **Known to everyone.** For the concierge to be effective, everyone at the institution needs to be aware that the person exists so that if a ready adult has a problem or question, other staffers can direct that person to the concierge.
- **A continual resource.** The concierge should be available to the student throughout the college experience, not just during admissions and registration. While most ready adults tend to need the concierge less as time goes by, relying more on their department or other campus resources as they become more comfortable at the institution, it is important for the concierge and the students to know that they still have a place to go should an issue arise.
- **A creative problem solver.** Sometimes a solution to a problem requires creative thinking, and the concierge needs to be empowered to do that. For instance, successful concierges in Nevada use policy waivers, or exemptions to standard policies and practices, in appropriate situations and step outside the usual protocols to find answers to questions and solutions to problems.



Conclusion

By having earned most of the college credits necessary for a degree, ready adults have demonstrated that they have the ability to succeed academically. In most cases they left college because life happened, not because they could not finish. As they consider coming back to college, they often face numerous administrative and academic obstacles in reenrolling and completing a degree. They are vulnerable in that if the institution does not serve them well in the beginning, they may give up and not return again. Although a single point of contact at an institution may not be able to solve every problem, a campus concierge can act as an essential guide or champion who can help the student efficiently deal with the barriers and challenges he or she faces along the way. Additionally, the concierge can help state and institutional policymakers identify and remedy policies and practices that are barriers to adult degree completion.

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Endnotes

¹ U.S. Department of Education: Institution of Education Sciences, "S1501. Educational Attainment," 2006-2008 American Community Survey 3-Year Estimates, accessed 30 August 2010 from <http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/STTable?_bm=y&-state=st&-qr_name=ACS_2008_3YR_G00_S1501&-ds_name=ACS_2008_3YR_G00_&-redoLog=true&_-caller=geoselect&-geo_id=01000US&-format=&_-lang=en>.

