# Acceleration: A Degree-Completion Strategy for Online Adult Students

According to the American Association of Community Colleges, adult students accounted for 63 percent of community college enrollments in 2016.[1] Because adult students commonly juggle college against work and family obligations, community colleges strive to develop alternative strategies and technologies to meet their needs. One of the most universally employed technologies for adult student education is online learning.

The National Adult Learner Coalition writes: "Online education has massively expanded access for adult learners, transcending not only distance but time, since many of these adults require the flexibility of schedule that online programs offer."[2] In Florida, for example, the state legislature has funded Complete Florida, an online initiative for Florida's 2.1 million working-age adults who have some college credits but stopped short of a baccalaureate-level credential.

In spite of the growth of online education, degree completion continues to challenge adult students. Nationally, the six-year completion rate for adults is 21 percent lower than for traditional-age students.[3] Jobs for the Future identifies acceleration as a degree-completion strategy that is essential for adult student success. Students who choose an accelerated program earn as many credit hours to complete a degree but move at a faster rate, which is important.[4] A national study conducted by Complete College America indicates that the longer it takes an adult to complete college, the less likely it is the adult will finish.[5] In other words, the longer adults are in college, the more likely it is that life will get in the way.

Below are four common acceleration strategies used in many community colleges today: multiple start/accelerated terms; competency-based education (CBE); Alternative Credit Project (ACP); and prior learning assessment (PLA).

- *Multiple Start/Accelerated Terms.* This option refers to courses offered in 5-, 6-, 8-, and 12-week terms. These options in scheduling are designed to give students the ability to take multiple courses, one at a time and sequentially. Students do not have to wait for the start of a new semester to take a class.
- *Competency-Based Education (CBE).* CBE permits students to progress through coursework at their own pace and receive credit based on their demonstrated mastery of competencies through tests, projects, and portfolios. CBE programs typically start new classes weekly, monthly, or even "on demand"—meaning anytime the student is ready.
- *Alternative Credit Project (ACP).* Through ACP, students are provided a pool of online courses that an institution will accept toward their degree. The courses offered are at little to no cost across more than twenty subject areas from multiple providers.
- *Prior Learning Assessment (PLA).* PLA allows students to demonstrate what they know to earn course credit, either through examination or through the development of a portfolio of work. By demonstrating mastery of course content and objectives in this way, students can bypass coursework and progress more quickly toward a degree.

## Technology Demands of Acceleration

Most acceleration strategies imply fully online, asynchronous, individualized, self-paced instruction that requires delivery through a robust learning management system (LMS) that can

- release content and course materials to each student in small, flexible chunks (i.e., modules) just at the time he or she needs them;
- track students who are moving at different paces and provide real-time progress and performance data to faculty members, coaches, and administrators;
- post and accept assignments and assessments at different times for different students;
- accommodate "rolling enrollments" that allow a student to complete and exit a course at some random, interim point in a semester and then enroll immediately into a subsequent course; and
- provide courseware-development and management capabilities that enable instructors to create, access, and curate materials and even open textbooks to ensure variations in student learning styles and aptitudes are accommodated.

While no single platform solution has yet been developed to support all of these requirements, many companies are working on them. LMS providers continue to add functionality that enables flexibility in course delivery and assessment, multilayer communication and interaction, and deep analytics around student behaviors and performance in online courses. Most LMS providers have at least developed prototype versions of platforms to support personalized, adaptive, and competency-based learning approaches:

- Cengage Learning recently released Learning Objects, its competency-based learning platform that supports self-

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paced, mastery-driven instruction that maps learning goals to assessments and learning activities.

- LoudCloud, in partnership with Barnes & Noble Education, has released its own adaptive platform specifically tailored to support competency-based learning.
- Motivis Learning is a platform built on Salesforce, a commercial customer relationship management tool. Motivis bills itself as a learning relationship management platform that "unifies content, communication, and data."
- Canvas by Instructure touts its open-source software and its extensive, open API that allows third-party apps to interface with Canvas to share data and integrate new technologies into courses.
- Brightspace by D2L bills itself as easy, flexible, and smart—able to deliver personalized or competency-based instruction to anyone, anyplace.

## Acceleration in Florida

Complete Florida is a network of fourteen regionally accredited partner institutions that have committed to provide online courses and programs and other technology-supported strategies that have been shown to meet the unique needs of adult students. Below are acceleration strategies being used (or tested) by four Complete Florida partner schools:

- *Florida State College at Jacksonville.* FSCJ Online offers students a variety of accelerated degree options in fields such as Business and Management, Health and Human Services, Information Technology, Education, Logistics, and an online Associate in Arts degree. There are three acceleration options at FSCJ: courses offered in compressed timeframes such as 8-week courses; credit offered through direct examination, which allows students to obtain credit for over 70 courses by passing an exam; and credit offered through PLA. Using PLA, students may receive credit by providing documentation of nonaccredited training such as military or corporate training. A one-hour online portfolio-development course teaches students how to document their learning via a portfolio so they may receive course credit.
- *Indian River State College.* In response to increasing demands for flexible, web-based course delivery, IRSC created its Virtual Campus and now offers 12 totally web-based degrees and hundreds of individual web-based courses. These programs enable a year-round registration schedule to provide students with multiple start options and the ability to move on more quickly to new courses without waiting for the start of a traditional semester. The Virtual Campus offers courses and degrees designed using the Quality Matters (QM) instructional design rubric. Instructional designers work collaboratively with faculty members to design the online courses, ensuring that the courses contain online pedagogy based on instructional design theory. IRSC has 176 QM-certified faculty members and over 250 courses that have achieved QM certification.

- *Miami Dade College.* MDC is a participant in the ACP, a program designed to help adults finish a degree or postsecondary certificate by offering them low-cost, online courses *prior to* admission. The concept is that many adult students have skills and knowledge that will enable them to complete these classes quickly and kickstart their program at MDC. The college will accept up to 45 ACP credits toward a degree. MDC faculty have reviewed and identified the courses they will accept into programs of study so students can clearly see the path forward.
- *Polk State College.* Polk State College has created an engineering technology CBE program that allows students to take classes at their own pace, often accelerating and earning their degrees quickly, based on the student's ability to demonstrate mastery of required modules. CBE students are also able to register for and begin courses any day of the year that the college is open for business. This means that once students successfully finish a course, even if in mid-semester, they can begin the next course immediately, which eliminates the delay of waiting for the start of a new semester and significantly reduces overall degree-completion time. A recent student, for example, completed his associate in science degree in just 16 months.[6]

As online programs continue to be an increasingly popular means of improving adult students' access to a college education, online student success strategies such as acceleration—and the technologies required to support them—will continue to be a significant area of focus for higher education institutions, particularly those serving primarily adult students. ∎

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### Notes

1. American Association of Community Colleges, *2016 Fact Sheet*.
2. National Adult Learner Coalition, "Strengthening America's Economy by Expanding Educational Opportunities for Working Adults," white paper, [February 2017], 6.
3. See Doug Shapiro, Afet Dundar, Phoebe Wakhungu, Xin Yuan, Angel Nathan, and Youngsik Hwang, "Completing College: A State-Level View of Student Attainment Rates," Signature Report No. 10a (Herndon, VA: National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, February 2016).
4. Jobs for the Future, "Expanding Competency-Based Education for All Learners," February 2016.
5. *Time Is the Enemy* (Washington, DC: Complete College America, September 2011).
6. "Polk State's Open-Entry, Early-Exit Degree Program Helps Students Get Education on Their Own Terms," Polk State College website, March 10, 2016.

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