ALFI in Montana: Are the State's Two-Year Institutions Adult-Learner Focused?

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<u>Introduction</u>
As part of the College!Now initiative to increase productivity via improved recruitment, retention, and graduation of adult learners, two-year institutions in Montana administered the Adult Learner-Focused Institution (ALFI) Toolkit during the spring of 2012. Adult learners (students age 25 and older), as well as a team of faculty, staff, and administrators at each institution, completed a survey of their perceptions of institutional performance on the Principles of Effectively Serving Adult Learners. The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) articulated these principles more than ten years ago, after conducting research to determine why some postsecondary institutions are particularly successful in helping adult learners achieve their educational goals.

In the ALFI administration, students complete the Adult Learner Inventory (ALI), developed by Noel-Levitz (consultants) and CAEL, while a small team of faculty, staff, and administrators at each institution completes the Institutional Self-Assessment Inventory (ISAS), developed by the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems and CAEL. The following are the nine essential principles on which the surveys are based:
1. **Outreach:** The institution conducts its outreach to adult learners by overcoming barriers in time, place, and tradition in order to create lifelong access to educational opportunities.
2. **Life & Career Planning:** The institution addresses adult learners' life and career goals before or at the onset of enrollment in order to assess and align its capacities to help learners reach their goals.
3. **Financing:** The institution promotes choice using an array of payment options for adult learners in order to expand equity and financial flexibility.
4. **Assessment of Learning Outcomes:** The institution defines and assesses the knowledge, skills, and competencies acquired by adult learners—both from the curriculum and from life and work experience—in order to assign credit and confer degrees with rigor. The institution has articulated principles and quality practices for prior learning assessment.
5. **Teaching-Learning Process:** Faculty members use multiple methods of instruction (including experiential and problem-based methods) for adult learners in order to connect curricular concepts to useful knowledge and skills.
6. **Student Support Systems:** The institution assists adult learners using comprehensive academic and student support systems in order to enhance students' capacities to become self-directed, lifelong learners.
7. **Technology:** Technology provides relevant and timely information that enhances the learning experience.
8. **Transitions:** The institution supports guided pathways that lead into and from the institution's programs and services in order to ensure that students' learning will apply usefully to achieving their educational and career goals.
9. **Strategic Partnerships:** The institution engages in strategic relationships, partnerships, and collaborations with employers and other organizations in order to develop and improve educational opportunities for adult learners. (Students are not asked about this

principle, on the assumption that they typically are unaware of the institution's strategic partnerships.)

The ALFI results provide data that compare the students' and the institutional team's ratings on each scale to ratings for students and institutional teams at other institutions that have used the ALFI assessment tools. The results also allow internal comparisons of the students' ratings to those of the institutional team for each scale (with, as noted above, the exception of Strategic Partnerships). Based on these data, institutions identify strengths and challenges, develop and prioritize strategic plans,, and identify specific steps to take in order to implement their plans and improve their performance.

<u>ALFI Administration in Montana</u>
The following schools participated in the spring 2012 ALFI administration in Montana:
- Bitterroot College
- Dawson Community College
- Flathead Valley Community College
- Miles Community College
- MSU Billings College of Technology
- MSU Gallatin College
- MSU Great Falls College of Technology
- Montana Tech of the University of Montana
- UM Helena College of Technology
- The University of Montana – College of Technology

(Because the response rates for students at MSU Northern and UM Western were too low for meaningful results, those surveys will be postponed until fall 2012.)

After completion of the ISAS and ALI surveys, each school received a basic report in both electronic and print formats. Included in the basic report are:
- The institution's ISAS scores
- The institution's ALI scores
- Comparisons to other institutions' ranks on each principle
- Internal comparisons of ISAS and ALI ranks
- A crosswalk of ISAS and ALI questions
- The maximum benchmark contribution scores for ISAS questions, related to each ALFI principle
- The institution's contribution scores for ISAS questions, related to each ALFI principle

Montana also received a composite report, considering all the participating institutions as one institution and comparing the results for this one "institution" to other ALFI schools.

Following receipt of the data, CAEL presented a PowerPoint summary and a webinar of the findings and suggestions for next steps. In addition, CAEL is available to institutions for a follow-up conversation about the data presented in the basic report.

Results – General Observations

- Congruence between the institutional team's and the students' ranks provide data to identify both the institution's strengths and its challenges.

- Lack of congruence between perceptions of students and the institutional team offers opportunities for further exploration and clarification. At one institution, for example, the institutional team's perceptions of performance on Student Support Services yield a rank of #7 (among 67 institutions), whereas students' perceptions yield a rank of #60.

  At another institution, students' perceptions of the school's performance on the Finance principle yield a rank of #3, while the institutional team's perceptions yield a rank of #51. Findings at this institution support the observation that students can be more satisfied with the institution's performance than faculty, staff, and administrators are. Institutions need not assume that all the ALFI data will indicate areas in which students are dissatisfied. Yet high student rankings paired with low team rankings merit further consideration in depth. In this case, the discrepancy between the perceptions of students and the institutional team – particularly in the area of Finance for adult learners -- provides a fruitful topic for further discussion.

- A review of the range of ranks within a single institution can indicate the general "mood" of the campus and its adult learners. For example, at one institution, student perceptions yield no rank higher than #52 (of 67 institutions). This would appear to be an institution at which students are not happy.

  Similarly, one can also infer the mood of faculty, staff, and administrators from the range of ranks within an institution. As a case in point, at one institution *four* of the ranks on the ISAS are #67, and the highest rank for that institutional team is #56. Clearly, these findings point to general dissatisfaction among faculty, staff, and administrators with how their institution is serving its adult learners.

- Comparing the range of the team's ranks to those of the students can help identify institutions in which perceptions simply don't match.   At the institution where four ISAS ranks are #67, for example, the lowest rank for students is #37. Similarly, at another institution two of the team's ranks fall to #53 and to #51, while the students' ranks range from#3 through #14. Why are there discrepancies in perceptions here? Despite dissatisfaction among faculty, staff, and administrators, students seem to be saying that their experiences as adult learners are "all right."

  Conversely, at one institution the range of ranks of ISAS scores is #3 through #40, whereas the range for ranks of ALI scores is #25 through #55. Here, the institutional team perceives a more satisfactory performance than adult students do.

- Institutions have unique strengths and can share best practices with one another.

- In the composite analysis, institutional teams and adult students in Montana agree that a strength of the two-year institutions is Technology.

- Conversely, Transitions and Outreach are areas in which institutional teams and students agree that more work needs to be done.

- Analysis of the composite score indicates that there is major disagreement in the perception of the institutions' performance on the principle of the Teaching-Learning Process. Although the rank for this on the ISAS survey is #3, its rank on the ALI is last, #7. Clearly, faculty, staff, and administrators have a perception of their success on this principle which differs significantly from students' perceptions.

Next Steps
- CAEL encourages each institution to take advantage of the offer of a conversation to discuss the basic report further and begin to plan an action strategy.

- After comparing the institutional team's rankings to the students' rankings, each school can :
  o Identify strengths and plan to market them
  o Identify challenges and plan specific steps to improve them. Here the Contribution Reports provided to each institution will prove very valuable.
  o Share with other Montana institutions their best practices for the areas in which the ALFI data indicate their strengths.

- For areas in which there is an internal lack of congruence when the team's ranks are compared to the students' CAEL recommends that each institution convene focus groups of students, faculty, staff, and administrators to address those differences. Here the Crosswalk of ISAS and ALI questions, provided as part of the basic report, will prove very valuable in identifying specific areas in which there are disagreements or misunderstandings, as well as in identifying specific steps to take to resolve the incongruities.

- The Two-Year and Community College administration can convene the institutions to address ways to market the strength of Technology. A joint strategy can help use all resources effectively.

- The Two-Year and Community College administration can convene the institutions to address the challenges of Transitions, Outreach, and the Teaching-Learning Process. Working together, the group can identify specific initiatives, assign responsibilities, and develop timelines for completion.

- The Two-Year and Community College administration can convene the institutions to share best practices in areas in which the individual schools have ranked highly.

- Individual institutions and the Two-Year and Community College administration can involve students in addressing strengths and challenges and in planning strategies for improvements.

Conclusion

Are Montana's two-year institutions adult-learner focused? In short, they are. By focusing on College!Now and administering the ALFI toolkit, the institutions demonstrate that they are genuinely concerned with the success of adult students. They recognize the importance of evaluating institutional performance in serving adult learners.

Results of the ALFI surveys indicate that the individual institutions – and the two-year institutions as a group – have strengths that they can effectively promote to recruit, retain, and graduate adult learners. Similarly, the results indicate their challenges and suggest specific activities to meet those challenges. With the help provided by the ALFI data, state institutions and the Two-Year and Community College administration can move forward to provide a two-year education "emphasizing workforce partnerships, flexible scheduling, open access admissions, core course programming, and increased opportunities and pathways for transfer to the four-year colleges and universities in the state" (Montana University System, Office of the Commissioner of Higher Education, May 25, 2012). Indeed, the goals of the state echo the goals of adult learning focused institutions throughout the nation. With the ALFI date as a guide to formulating specific strategic plans, with defined action goals and timeframes, Montana institutions can become not only more adult-focused, but also more successful.