

Higher Education Needs a “New Front Door” for Adults

Dr. Garrison Walters, Executive Director, SC Commission on Higher Education

July 2008

Educating more adults, by which I mean people 21 or over who lack college degrees, has to be at the top of South Carolina’s agenda for achieving competitiveness in today’s knowledge economy. Even if South Carolina were to somehow immediately increase its high school graduation, college-going, and college graduation rates (two and four year) to the highest levels in the country, we would still be 112,000 degrees short of economically competitive education levels in 2025.

What about doing something for the more than a million people in South Carolina who are between the ages of 25-54 (peak working years) and who lack the college education—degree or certificate--that is needed for today’s high wage jobs? Colleges and universities do have many programs to support non-traditional students, but we need to reach much more of the potential audience. How?

First, we have to recognize that our target adult audience lacks confidence in their abilities. Many were poor students in high school and as a result fear that they cannot ever succeed. The reality, of course, is that most are quite capable but their high school work was hobbled by immaturity—they didn’t realize learning was important. Second, these potential students are usually working or have family responsibilities or both. Finding the time for traditional classwork is a big challenge for them.

Third, adults lacking college education generally have limited financial resources and, even with financial aid, can’t afford to enroll at current prices; and

Fourth, adults are often unwilling to take the risk to go to college because they don’t see any near-term relevance to their employability or job advancement.

So, what’s a solution? Let’s build a system of certificates that: 1) provide credit for relevant existing knowledge and abilities; 2) are no-fail; 3)

are flexibly scheduled; 4) are low or no-cost; and 5) include content of relevance to people in today’s workplace.

No-fail for these early courses is critical—it will send message to these folks that *we really want them to succeed*. Standards will remain high—grades are “pass” or “not yet.”

Including knowledge that’s immediately applicable to work—core information technology skills and instruction in critical thinking (the ability to analyze and evaluate information) will enhance employability.

The certificates would give adults a “you are here” map that is as easy to understand as grades in school, except that there would be choices: take a traditional college program or go to advanced training. And, if you choose training, most of the work could transfer back to a college program. There must be “no wrong door” for adults.

The certificate system could be offered by a wide array of providers across the state. Standardized certificates would have clear meaning to employers (who would help define them) and the new system would have the scale to be marketed effectively. Many of today’s local programs are very strong and effective, but lack of critical mass makes it hard to advertise to a clientele that needs effective persuasion far more than most. To increase accessibility, some certificates or parts of certificates could be offered by an array of providers, including businesses working under the aegis of a technical college.

Solving the adult education problem will take a lot of work, but the good news is that there’s a real commitment to change. The Commission on Higher Education, the Technical College system, the Department of Education, the Department of Commerce, and others are all working together under the leadership of New Carolina to develop a bold strategy that will move our state forward—and soon. Your ideas are most welcome.