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The American Association of Community Colleges’ Plus 50 Initiative: The Ohio Experience
What is the American Association of Community College’s (AACE) Plus-50 Initiative?

- Started in 2008 and concluded in late 2015
- Small grants were awarded to 138 community colleges
- Funders included The Atlantic Philanthropies, Lumina Foundation, and Deerbrook Charitable Trust
- Purpose was to create or expand campus programs that engage the Plus-50 student population
- Focused on workforce training and preparing older adults for new careers
- Seven of Ohio’s 23 community colleges participated and each received $10,000 - $15,000 over three year period
Ohio’s Projected Change in Labor Force by Age Group: 2012 – 2022 (in thousands)
Our Research

• Mixed methods research project funded by the U.S. Department of Education

• Qualitative research focuses on three case study colleges and key informant interviews at other community colleges

• Insights were gained by focusing specifically on the AACC Plus-50 Initiative

• Focus groups of age 50-plus students and interviews with program administrators
Findings: Program Administrators

- Grant energized colleges to focus on older students
- Support from top administrators important
- Colleges were provided with resources to better serve age 50+ students
- Advisory Committees guided program to focus on employer relationships and existing services that could be made more friendly to the 50+ population
  - Employers/industry participants
  - College staff providing support services
  - Representatives of Ohio Department of Job and Family Services
  - Student representatives
Findings: Program Administrators

College specific programs:

- Leveraged AACC grant to obtain an additional $90,000 in funding
  - Funds used for computer classes and short term training
- Targeted recently unemployed by obtaining names from the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services
- Tuition free enrollment for one credit class per semester for age 50+ group
- Pedagogy training for faculty so they could better serve older students provided
- Quick Start program
Findings: Program Administrators

Program Concerns:

• AACC reporting requirements considered by some to be onerous for a small grant
• Funds were not available for scholarships
• Lack of clarity on program objectives
  • Short-term training vs degree completion
• Sustainability
Findings: Student Focus Groups

- Two focus groups each at two Plus 50 colleges
- N=24 students ages 50-73
  - Variety of prior education: high school through master’s degrees
- Little awareness of Plus 50 initiative
- Minimal awareness of other age-targeted efforts
- Social and health events that precipitate enrollment often persist during enrollment and are major challenges
- Gap years have significant effect on academic preparedness
  - Math in particular emerges as a deal-breaker in academic options
- Gap years (since last schooling) somewhat compensated for by maturity and adaptive strategies
Issues of career fit with life stage and health status are reflected in a struggle to find solid academic pathways

Sense of urgency impacts selection of academic programs

Although many barriers to success are universal (cross age groups), functional age and life-stage challenges require age-related accommodations

  - Faculty and staff can be trained to respond to challenges
  - Age-specific programs (e.g. Plus 50) have important place

Student-identified challenges call for student-centered programming

  - Advising services
  - Student success course vs one-time orientation
We Need to Keep Learning!

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