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Yang, Jonathon ***Change Management in Higher Education: An Institutional Study on Expanding a Holistic Approach to Online Learning for Adult Learners***

Abstract

Using change management theory, this research involved an institutional study of adult learners at the University of Wisconsin – Stout to identify barriers they face in higher education. A survey was distributed to the target population on campus to identify barriers in order to propose new services and processes to establish in an online learning environment to provide more accessibility and inclusiveness. The study showed that there are many barriers adult learners face related to personal, academic, financial. These results were used to discuss what types of services are missing and needed in order to not only focus on redesigning curriculum but also to include a more holistic approach to reduce or eliminate barriers. The research recommends using change management theory to help establish these newly identified areas of improvement on an organizational and operational level to help college institutions transition their academic program and services online, especially as Covid-19 continues to present challenges for traditional in-person learning.

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Throughout this process, there were many individuals who contributed to the research as well as to completing this Plan B. In regard to the research, I would like to thank Mandy Wolbert and Renee Surdick for helping me identify a research focus early on the process. Additionally, I also am appreciative of their assistance in identifying the target population and distributing the survey to participants. During this time, I also had an opportunity to work as a Research Assistant and Graduate Assistant in the Customized Instruction – Online Business Management program, which gave me the knowledge and experience I needed in order to conduct this research. As one of the team members of the Re-up Pilot Program at UW-Stout, I learned a lot about adult learners and that contributed to the interest in applying operations and change management theory to higher education. While it is not a new topic, it certainly was in a time of Covid-19. Secondly, I would like to thank Dr. Xuedong Ding for his mentorship and advising of my Plan B. Completing the Plan B also involved support from my family and friends.

I want to take a moment to acknowledge their encouragement and belief in me, especially during difficult times when it helped the most. Last but not least, I want to thank my wife, Jamie Vue, for her support, guidance, and patience with me as I worked through graduate school and the Plan B. There were many areas of improvement and the guidance and support of these individuals is what led to the completion of my research.

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Chapter I: Introduction

COVID-19 has caused a major disruption to higher education policies, processes, and the ways in which instruction is delivered to students, and it is important for college institutions to anticipate how living in the era of COVID-19 will impact student enrollment for the foreseeable future. While enrollment in the first few months of COVID-19 did not see a notable decrease in the spring 2020 semester, the national data since shows a decrease in new enrollment as institutions continue to adapt to the pandemic (Sedmak, 2020). This is a cause for concern, but also provides an opportunity for college institutions to pause and reevaluate the current infrastructure to adapt and provide the most effective learning environment to attract and retain students. This will require many uncomfortable changes but applying change management theory, which includes organizational and operational development, will aid in supporting college institutions through the changes and transition. Arguably, now more than ever with the pandemic, student retention should remain a pertinent topic in higher education as trends continue to show decreasing enrollment in four-year college institutions (Bustamante, 2019). Considering that college revenue comes from student tuition, this poses a threat to many institutions who rely on this as their source of livelihood, especially colleges that have been forced to implement and adapt to online learning who may not yet be well-versed in much of its operations existing in a virtual world. Online delivery of instruction needs to be one of the focal points of how to establish new modes of operations and business practices to maintain the existence and livelihood of college institutions as students weigh their options of attending college.

Due to COVID-19, many institutions have implemented modified academic instruction including hybrid (a combination of online and face-to-face) or entirely delivering instruction

through asynchronous/synchronous online platforms. At the time of this research, with no vaccine in sight and the continued fear of exposure to the virus, institutions must face the reality that online learning is inevitable as becoming the primary mode of delivery. This means it is integral to identify and establish the most effective practices to serving diverse student populations. However, this does not mean entirely inventing something new as much as it is about reinventing models that already exist to adapt to Covid-19. For many years, online education has been implemented by college institutions and advancements have been made since by some of the top leading online colleges such as Southern New Hampshire University, University of Wisconsin Extension, and Liberty University, targeting many student populations. One student population being adult learners, where there is extensive research in higher education to identify student needs and barriers.

In recent years, there has been more of a focus on a new student group within higher education, which is the adult learner. Donaldson and Townsend (2007) state that from 1999 to 2000 about 7.1 million adults from the age of 24 or older make up about 43% of the college undergraduate population, which has increased compared to the 5.73 million from the prior period of 1989 to1990. According to Aslanian (2006), the adult learner is defined as a student who is of 25 years of age or older, and institutions use this as the typical profile of the adult learner group. In considering the adult learner profile, these older students tend to have different circumstances than the traditional student who have different physical, psychological, and social needs. Adult learners are more attracted to the idea of online learning because it suits the circumstances of their personal life where they may be juggling family, work, and other commitments. With more college institutions moving online, this may open more opportunities to provide flexible and accessible instruction to adult learners. Knowing that student retention

could become an issue for traditional students, recruitment in the time of Covid-19 is especially important, and institutions have to ask: What can college institutions learn about the needs and barriers of the adult learner to gain information on how to adapt and develop to recruit adult learners for an effective online learning environment?

Statement of the Problem

With many unpredictable changes that Covid-19 presents and no plan of direction, a university's operational changes will affect the way institutions have delivered services and instruction. As Covid-19 continues to pose a threat, the problem higher education institutions now face is that the recruitment and retention of students is at risk, affecting overall student enrollment numbers.

Purpose of the Study

The intent of the study is to identify the unique needs and barriers of the adult learner in order to anticipate the need for different approaches, with a primary focus on online learning, to help recruit adult learners to increase or maintain college enrollment, with the hopes of possibly leading to better retention in the long run. Understanding the needs and barriers of adult learners can help institutions from an operations and organizational point of view to implement a more tailored and effective online learning experience using the change management theory to give themselves a competitive advantage.

Assumptions of the Study

The assumptions of this study are to determine whether targeting the adult learner population will be an effective strategy for student recruitment purposes to enhance enrollment. Some assumptions were made, first, assuming that most surveyed participants were part of the Adult learner population.

The second assumption is that responses from the participants will help identify the barriers of the adult learner population and to create changes on an operational and organizational level to help prospective future adult learners overcome these barriers.

The third assumption is to understand why the participants decided to come back to college later in life. This understanding can help universities create marketing materials to better recruitment and have better retention opportunities.

Limitations of the Study

The limitations of this study stem from the student demographic information provided by the UW-Stout's Business Management Online Program. The student information consisted of student contact information including name changes, student status, or contact information that may or may not be up to date in the UW system databases, which may limit the number of surveys received by respondents if the information is inaccurate or outdated. Another challenge is that the survey was only sent out on an institutional level from the UW-Stout Business Management Online Program, limiting responses large enough to generalize across the adult learner. Lastly, the timeframe of three months may have limited responses.

Methodology

Initially, the first step was to research the literature available on the current traditional student retention and enrollment trends in higher education including drop-out rates and graduation rates for traditional students. A comparison between that existing body of literature to the adult learner was taken next to illuminate how the adult learner population has integrated as one of the newer student groups in higher education. In addition, the literature also provided research on different barriers that the adult learner population has faced or will face as they return to college either through online instruction or in person.

Following the research, questions gauging qualitative and quantitative data were designed and implemented into a survey to collect data. The survey was sent to students in the Business Management Program at UW-Stout and given a timeframe of three months to complete. The data was categorized to evaluate and analyze for trends using a thematic analysis approach.

Chapter II: Literature Review

It is important to understand how Covid-19 could potentially change the landscape of higher education in terms of college enrollment. Across the nation, many universities have chosen various models of delivering instruction including hybrid (face-to-face and online) or moving completely online until further notice. Since the beginning of the 2020-2021 academic year, many colleges have intermittently moved online to curve and contain the spread of Covid-19, and it is reasonable to think that online learning will inevitably be the primary mode of delivering instruction in order to keep efficiency and consistency for planning purposes. To understand the multifaceted issue, an analysis into several areas can provide a better understanding of the issue at large. Those topics include current research on the impact of Covid-19, change management in higher education, understanding the adult learner, and the evolution of online learning. This can provide a comprehensive picture of what areas in higher education need to take into consideration when discussing the possibility of developing an online experience that not only includes curricular design but a holistic online community experience.

Covid-19 Impact on Higher Education

During the pandemic of 2020, Covid-19 caused a disturbance in higher education and threatened student enrollment, which is the livelihood of many institutions. In a recent study by the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC; 2020), the general data shows that the enrollment for most universities in the spring semester of 2020 was not heavily affected by Covid-19 compared to previous years; however, new enrollments were lower than previous years around April 2020 compared to previous spring semesters (Sedmak, 2020). This point is also stated more specifically with data from 2018 and 2019 showing new April enrollment at roughly 90,000, but it fell by 17,000 in 2020 (McKenzie, 2020). This is important to note as a sign of future trouble

for student enrollment considering current circumstances are not improving as the cases of COVID-19 continue to increase across the nation with the current positive cases at roughly 7 million totals (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], n.d.). In addition, there are impacts to certain student demographics that could affect student enrollment in the long run such as Black and Latino communities who generally face more economic hardships from the impact of COVID-19 (McKenzie, 2020). Enrollment may be further impacted in the reduced number of international students that can attend abroad (Smalley, 2020). With student enrollment already on the decline and the unpredictable impact COVID-19 causes, it is reasonable to anticipate that change in organization and operations will be a major challenge for many institutions.

This is concerning as college enrollment has continued to decline in general, especially in the era of Covid-19. In a report released in 2019 by the NSC, college enrollment in the United States is in its 8th straight year of decline for students eligible for federal financial aid (Fain, 2019). It becomes a priority especially when student dropout rates begin to climb because the revenue gained from student tuition directly affects every aspect of a college institution's operations from program services to quality of education to campus activities to personnel including staff and faculty. Tinto (1975, 1993) has found in his studies that over 40 percent of college students who enter higher education leave before they earn a degree, 75 percent become dropouts in the first two years of college, and that colleges will experience 56 percent of students from a cohort not graduating from the initial college of entry (as cited in Deshields, Kara, and Kaynak, 2005). The percentages are staggering and is problematic for student enrollment. This data coupled with the looming threat of Covid-19 requires institutions to consider new changes. Change management in organizational development and operations from a business perspective

can provide a model for implementation of an online learning and community experience for adjustment.

Change Management: Organizational and Operational

Business models have long been applied to higher educational institutions and have evolved and adapted to changing times as well as the needs of recruitment and retention to generate revenue. In research by Christensen, Horn, Caldera, and Soares (2011), they summarize that universities developed in the 17th and 18th centuries largely as teaching institutions. However, over time universities have evolved to be more expensive with three types of models with three value propositions. The first is an institution research, which is organized as a solution shop model; the second is teaching, which is a value-adding process activity; and lastly, facilitated networks in which students work to help each other succeed and have fun (Christensen et al., 2011). In many aspects of higher education, business models have been applied to improve services provided to students as consumers. Considering how much higher education has changed, there is still much about it that remains the same under traditional and conventional standards. However, with Covid-19 presenting many challenges, it also provides an opportunity for institutions to reform outdated practices.

To modernize institutional practices, many changes on organizational and operational levels can cause internal issues, which is where change management can assist in this period of transition. Before discussing the operational side of change management, it is important to acknowledge the effect of organizational change, which is the human factor (Terrell, 2015). Regardless of how successful operational change is, it cannot happen if there is no consideration of the human aspect that could result in resistance. Cultural shifts in organizations involve managing the emotions of employees to minimize issues related to implementing new processes

(Terrell, 2015), and in the case of higher education, parents, students, staff, faculty, administrators, and other stakeholders. The flexibility of cultural shifts within an institution is one that must be dealt with sensitively and seriously if change is to be executed successfully without risking a collapse. Understandably, there are real human emotions involved when changes are made on a large scale, and college students, parents, staff, faculty may feel they need to be heard. This puts institutions under a microscope of scrutiny. As an observation, many institutions held public forums for parents, students, staff, and faculty over the summer of 2020 to provide transparency and an opportunity to receive feedback on proposed changes to help ease anxiety and fears. This is a way to manage people and provide reassurance; however, the proposed changes may be met with apprehension the institution. Bugay (2011) mentions that higher education institutions may resist change because they are built on deep-rooted practices that are protected by those in a higher position in academia. Considering this, it is equally important for change to happen on an individual level as well as an organizational level, and acceptance comes more easily when proper steps are taken, and strategies provide reassurance and confidence in the change process.

To take a further look at the change process from an organizational perspective, the diagram below illustrates the course of change management process that an institution should take into consideration when proposing changes (Kreutzer, Neugebauer, & Pattloch, 2017).

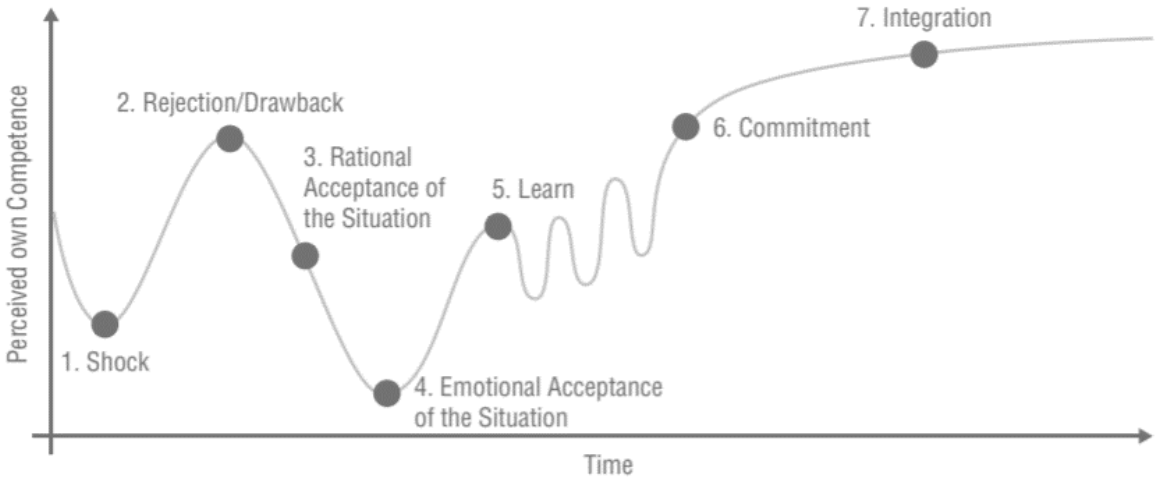

Figure 1. Course of change management process. (https://link-springer-com.ezproxy.lib.uwstout.edu/content/pdf/10.1007%2F978-3-662-56548-3.pdf)

The diagram shows the course of managing emotions and helps identify strategies to employ to address the phases of change process. With Covid-19 forcing major changes, shock and rejection must be addressed appropriately for acceptance to happen. Change on a small scale is likely to produce less pushback compared to major changes such as those presented by Covid-19 impacting all campus activities. The proper responses to the emotional and mental needs of all parties involved determines the acceptance and outcomes of the proposed changes. For buy-in to happen on an organizational level, the integration during the introduction phase is of utmost importance (Terrell, 2015). Higher education poses some challenges since existing policies, procedures, and processes (PPP) at the university level are long established and breaking from conventions has generally proven to be a difficult endeavor for various reasons including “fear of change and culture” (Bugay, 2011). Firmly rooted processes typically involve campus-wide or committee deliberation and strategic planning can take months to years to implement. However, with COVID-19, there is little time to deliberate the bureaucracies of higher education to make rapidly needed decisions. In order to approach this issue, Bugay (2011) states that by employing

tools of change management, the adjustment to new changes can move along with more progress in a productive manner and in turn give it more of an edge among its competitors. This will help address the cultural shift that will likely involve managing the emotions and behavior of stakeholders and parties. Transitioning online during Covid-19 almost instantly did not provide time, but many institutions used the summer of 2020 for strategic and thoughtful planning to help manage the situation (Smalley, 2020). By including voices of necessary parties involved, operations will likely reflect the interests of all stakeholders and facilitate the new changes more smoothly. However, there is no doubt it will still be a challenge to implement these changes on an operational level.

In addition to organizational development, operational change management process is the proactive steps taken to bring about change to the systems in which the employees operate (Terrell, 2015). This aspect of change management deals with the task force or team in charge of the "change activities" to ensure proper steps are created to implement effective systems for people (Terrell, 2015). With that in mind, four-year colleges can benefit from a task force evaluating its current services, taking cost-effective measures, and streamlining its processes and operations in order to maximize quality and efficiency. In higher education, change on a systems level is a difficult undertaking because university PPP's are interconnected and well established (Bugay, 2011). To change the way an institution operates in a short amount of time is sure to present some challenges because it requires new systems to be developed. Without much time, shortcuts and oversights are to be a given, which can impact efficiency and may not be cost-effective in the long run. On the other hand, cost efficiency determines many of the decisions made by administrators, which may not always bring about the best results for students (Bugay, 2011). With Covid-19, these decisions are being made at a rapid pace to adapt to new conditions

that the virus presents, possibly causing an overlook in operations. However, operational change management can provide a framework to work within, which makes executing the new changes in process and systems more effectively and strategically. It provides a chance for institutions to respond proactively rather than reactively. In higher education, operations will look vastly different than it has in the past since many institutions are operating in an online world using technology and platforms that require adjustment. Operational change management allows for a fluid transition from old to new with well-defined activities and step-by-step processes to guide (Terrell, 2015). In higher education, there are new challenges that will require changes from instruction to technology to admissions and enrollment that requires employees to come together in order to systematically work (Smalley, 2020). This is easier to facilitate if the management of that is met in a methodical and strategic manner (Terrell, 2015).

Change management process in higher education specifically include certain change activities, which is an effective way to identify starting points for administrators to consider when making operational change. Denna (2014) say operational change must consider these change activities: who is served, how should we help those who are served, and how should we deliver those services. Additional change activities also include defining the relationship to those we serve, how efforts translate to revenue, key activities needed to create the services, key resources institutions need to provide, and key partners needed to create the services an institution provides (Denna, 2014). All of these are then factored into the institutions cost model in order to make operational changes happen strategically and effectively (Deanna, 2014). These operational change activities provide strategic focuses in order to adapt or develop new processes to improve the online experiences for students. Resources and services are provided by personnel, and a point made by Christensen et. al (2011) is that processes can provide consistent

results. This requires all employees and administrators on an operational level to successfully produce and implement new processes, policies, and procedures in an efficient manner. The intersection of business and higher education can improve operations and processes meant to serve students, but the student demographic must be understood to identify resources and services that become a part of the system.

With change management, organizational and operational funnels down to the processes within an organization, and the processes are determined by the services provided to students. Those services must be identified in order to understand what processes need to be improved. COVID-19 presents new territory, and one group that can provide possible understanding to how to improve the online environment through revamping processes, improving curriculum, and to identify missing services or resources is the adult group who typically prefer distance learning. Sukowski (2011) states that different student populations face challenges that must be converted into services to meet their needs. By understanding the adult learner, it can extend to the larger student population since there is already research developed specifically discussing the online experience.

Adult Learner Profile in Higher Education

In recent years, colleges have been targeting the adult learner as they are an increasing student group. According to a report by the National Center for Education Statistics (n.d.), 38% of the 19.7 million students projected to attend in the fall of 2020 are 25 and older, which would categorize them in the adult learner group. With such a large percentage of college students being defined as adult learners, many college institutions have capitalized on this student group, seeing it as a new consumer group that could lead to higher student enrollment (Compton, Cox, & Laanan, 2006). One explanation could be that for the past 20 years, technological

advancements have allowed more accessibility and inclusion of adult learners to enroll in college at higher rates than ever before (Park & Choi, 2009). The profile of an adult learner is important to define as it leads to identifying unique characteristics.

Much research has been done to define the profile of an adult learner, and the definition has expanded over the years to further refine our understanding. In research by Kobena Osam, Bergman, and Cumberland (2017), they defined the adult learner as individuals over the age of 22, with the traditional age college student falling between ages 18 to 22. This has been defined differently by Lane (2004) who raises the age to 25 years and older and generally have at least four non-traditional factors, which include financial independence, full-time employment, dependents, and part-time enrollment. Of course, this is a generalization of this student group who come from many socioeconomic statuses and backgrounds, but it is helpful to give a broad picture as a starting point. For many years, statistics have been showing an increase in students over the age of 22 enrolling in college with a projection of a continual trend (Planty et al., 2009). Based on these growing percentages, colleges have been targeting this age group in order to increase student enrollment as it continues to decline.

While recruiting has not slowed down, retention of the adult learner has been an issue in higher education. The adult learner was recruited to campus without consideration of needs and resources to fit their circumstances because it required having to implement new changes. For the adult learner, this meant they often were expected to function in an environment that was not made to help them succeed. Steltenpohl and Shipton (1986) discuss that college is a rite of passage for high school students, which does not apply to adult learners who have experience in the workforce or other life experiences they can contribute significantly. The life cycle of a traditional college student is different than the adult learner with different characteristics and

needs than traditional students. With this in mind, institutions need to examine issues or factors that affect student retention to gain information on how to tailor a suitable learning environment, which involves changes in processes and practices. Furthermore, Steltenpohl and Shipton (1986) mention in a recent book*, Andragogy in Action*, that universities have responded ineffectively and at a slow rate in adapting educational practices to the adult learner. While college institutions continue to recruit the adult learner, it is problematic if retention becomes an issue due to a lack of understanding how to support this student group. Another aspect to consider by Carney-Crompton and Tan (2002) is that traditional high school aged students enrolling in college right out of high school is decreasing (as cited in Kobena Osam, Bergman, and Cumberland, 2017). These students are waiting longer after high school to attend college, which presumably means they are returning as adults after gaining life and work experience that can negatively interfere or positively contribute to their learning experience. With students going to college later and adult learners returning at an increasing rate, this is a group that can become a viable source of revenue for universities. However, if adult learners are returning during the COVID-19 era, they will be joining in an online environment. With COVID-19 forcing many institutions to take a closer look at their online programs, they must be ready to address the missing gaps from an institutional perspective as well as from the student perspective.

Adult Learners and Online Instruction

Traditionally, learning was held in classrooms and has evolved over time with technology as the internet was introduced. Research show that online learning developed out of a need for distance learning, which was documented around the 1800s, with some of the earliest forms of distance learning consisting of letter correspondence, the radio, and television (Hiltz & Turoff, 2005; Kentnor, 2015). Technological advancements sped up how quickly information could be

processed, received, and provided to create more access to education. With the invention of the internet, access to education opened up even more widely, which led to various forms of blended or hybrid courses and eventually normalized digital learning as a profitable and accepted mode of delivery (Hiltz & Turoff, 2005). Now commonly referred to as online learning, researchers are finding that the modality of online learning is on its way to replacing traditional face-to-face classes. However, even though technology has provided more access, it does not mean the quality of curriculum delivery has proven to be effective and in turn preferred by the majority of students.

Best practices for online learning have also evolved as instructors adapted traditional methods of teaching in combination with tools and platforms in the online environment. In recent times, online learning combined best teaching methods, student-centered learning theories, and emerging online platforms and tools to provide an adaptive and personalized space to fit the needs of the student (Powell et al., 2015). Over the years, online learning models have expanded to include the rotation model, flex model, a la carte model, and enriched virtual model; however, institutions still face constraints and barriers when trying to implement online learning effectively for student engagement (Powell et al., 2015). Many institutions are left to experiment and test different software and approaches to find the best fit for their students and campus, and with technology rapidly evolving it presents many advantages and disadvantages with so many different options. In addition, from a student perspective, many institutions have failed to implement engaging and interactive online learning curriculum, leading to many dropouts (Kim & Bonk, 2006). As online learning is continuing to grow there has been a growing issue and fear over the increased number of dropouts from online learning (Park & Choi, 2009). Specifically looking at the adult learner who typically prefers online learning, research shows there are still

many wide gaps that need to be addressed. According to Meister (2002), about 70 percent of adult learners that registered online do not finish their programs (as cited in Park & Choi, 2009). That is an alarming percentage of dropouts for a student group that arguably has the motivation that differs from traditional age student (Cercone, 2008). This is further supported by other studies showing a higher changeover of online learners dropping out compared to in-person learning (Hiltz, 1997; Merisotis & Phipps, 1999). If dropout rates are higher for online learners than in-person classes, college intuitions that provide online learning also need to investigate the issue in order to provide better quality of online education (Kim & Bonk, 2006). This requires evaluating the design of the course to see what is causing students to drop out of online learning. While online learning is a growth strategy for many college institutions, it is not clear as to what models or approaches provides the best direction to create an attractive and effective online program.

To provide quality online programs, college institutions need to assess whether they are adept at providing online learning along with evaluating the needs of their student demographics in order to develop best approaches and practices, with one of the typical users of distance learning as the adult learner. In terms of college institution preparedness for implementing online learning programs, research by Kim and Bonk (2006) state that factors such as monetary support, pedagogical competency of online instructors, technical competency, improvements in online technologies, marketing, and accreditation can impact the success of online programs. These are areas that intuitions must consider in order to improve delivery and design of online curriculum. As for evaluating the needs of the adult learner, Cercone (2008) discusses the characteristics of the adult learner and the insights it can provide to developing better online learning. For adult learners, one of the most well-known learning theories developed in 1980 by Malcom S.

Knowles is andragogy, which finds that there are significant differences in learning characteristics between children and adults (Cercone, 2008). In summary, adult learners have complex personal situations that include caring for family, finding childcare, caring for aging parents, and balancing work, life, and school (Cercone, 2008). In addition, Cercone (2008) also points out the biological changes that adults face, which could affect learning abilities, self-confidence, self-efficacy, which can impact academic performance. Institutions can benefit from taking a look at their online programs as well as understanding their student demographics that utilize online education.

Much research has been done on the adult learner in relation to online learning to understand the many advantages and benefits it provides. Among others, flexibility and convenience are attractive features of online learning because it allows for the adult learner to incorporate education into their busy lifestyles (Bourdeaux & Schoenack, 2016; Huang, 2002; Park & Choi, 2009). This allows adult learners to learn at their own pace, in their own location, and on their own time (Vrasidas & McIsaac, 2000). In addition, Merriam et. al (2007) support the demand for flexibility and add that saving costs from commuting to campus is also beneficial for the adult learner who will likely not live on campus (as cited in Hueyzher and Baharom, 2018). Online learning allows adult learners to be able to continue living their normal daily lives while being able to manage their own learning without the frustration of meeting strict deadlines that may interfere with their lives (Huang, 2002). Even though online learning allows flexibility of time and space, the drop-out rates are a sign that institutions still finding it challenging to create an effective online learning experience.

Based on research, many college institutions are aware that curricular design needs improvement; however, one dimension that has not been addressed is whether additional services

and resources are needed to provide a holistic online experience. COVID-19 is making it clear that institutions need to focus on more than just redesigning curriculum, training instructors for best teaching practices, and streamlining technological platforms. Considering how much institutions know about how to improve online learning, the data and research show that dropout rates for online learning continues to persist. This fact should raise concerns but more importantly ideas on how to retain students in an online environment. While institutions have long discussed how to improve online curricular design, a missing and essential piece of the conversation is how to improve the overall online experience to include academic, personal, environmental, technological, financial, and other resources. It may be time that institutions start thinking about how to create a virtual world where education exists not only in the form of curriculum but services and resources. Taking this direction leads to innovative ideas, having a competitive advantage, and overall increasing student enrollment to survive in the era of Covid-19.

To better understand how to apply change management during Covid-19 to develop processes needed to implement services and resources, an institutional study at the University of Wisconsin-Stout was conducted to gauge what factors lead the adult learner to drop out. This will help identify necessary services and resources needed in order to operate and learn in an online environment.

Chapter III: Methodology

According to the Planning, Assessment, Research, and Quality data at the University of Wisconsin-Stout student enrollment has declined in the past few years. Additionally, with Covid-19 may compound the issue of decreasing student enrollment until further notice. To gather ideas of how to maintain and increase student enrollment during tumultuous times, an institutional study was conducted to gather data from the University of WI-Stout. The focus of this study is to gather more information on the adult learner group, the possible barriers they face, and why they are now enrolling or re-enrolling in college again to identify services that may be needed or improved from an operations perspective with the hopes of having positive implications for the entire student and campus body. The researcher worked with the Online Business Management Program at UW-Stout to identify a database of students eligible for the study. Due to the nature of the information being sought, the participants were a mixture of current and graduated students within the Online Business Management Program.

Subject Selection and Description

For a timeframe, a list of sample subjects consisting of students from the Online Business Management Program at UW-Stout was pulled with attendance dates starting from fall 2015 through the summer semester of 2019. These dates were identified to provide more up-to-date trends and responses. Secondly, the range of dates also offered a larger sample of participants to maximize the collection of data. The students' program plans ranged widely, but it was not a filter used in narrowing down the participants. To maximize results, the survey was sent out to all students on the list provided regardless if the student was active or inactive to elicit responses from both groups in order to further understand current barriers and barriers that led to drop-out.

Even though the survey was not limited to any age group, race, or gender, the focus of this study was to filter by age in order to apply results to the adult learner of 24 and older.

Instrumentation

The survey used in this research was created through a secure network using Qualtrics software. The survey consisted of 14 questions (Appendix A) and all questions were designed with forced answer to gather comprehensive data. There were quantitative and qualitative questions to gather important information regarding student demographics and content questions to gather thematic responses. The survey consisted of 14 questions.

Question 1 asked for the age range the student fell in to categorize results by age. This question helped filter out students who were not by age defined as the adult learner. Considering that this study is focusing on adult learners, this question is important to ask to eliminate any inapplicable responses.

Question 2 asked for the ethnicity of the survey participant in order to gauge any unique trends in relation to their race. While the study's aim is not specifically focused on race and ethnicity, it is important to ask this question because research show that minority students face greater systemic and socioeconomic challenges. In order to take this into consideration, this question was asked to see if the data collected provided any significant results for consideration in providing recommendations to college institutions during the time of COVID-19 and beyond.

Question 3 asked for the gender of the survey participants to see if there were any significant trends related to gender. Similarly, to the ethnicity and race question, it is important to take gender into consideration to see if there are unique differences that could result in different needs for a college institution to implement.

Question 4 asked the survey participants to identify as either a stop-out student or a transfer student. This question helps identify whether there are similar or unique barriers for stop-out students and transfer students of the adult learner population. The researcher made sure to identify the two terms in order to record accurate responses regarding both student groups.

Question 5 asked the survey participants whether they previously attended UW-Stout. This question was designed to see if there were any specific institutional reasons for why students stopped-out in their learning.

Question 6 is a text-entry question and asked the survey participant for their first enrollment date at a college institution to determine the length of time in college before stopping-out.

Question 7 is a text-entry question and asked the survey participant for the date of stop-out to help determine the length of time in college before stopping-out.

Question 8 is a text-entry question and asked the survey participants to for the re-enrollment date to determine the lapse of time in their education and to see if there was an identifiable pattern for further implications.

Question 9 asked the survey participants if they were employed at the time of re-enrolling in college to determine if employment played any factor in motivation to return to college.

Question 10 asked the survey participants about barriers they faced while in college to determine any noticeable trends. This question was designed based on research available about common barriers adult learners face. It was also designed with the intent of gathering more information about barriers in order to identify unique services that would result in recommendations of improving process on an operations level.

Question 11 asked survey participants to identify any barriers or obstacles they faced in their re-enrollment at UW-Stout. This question was designed to help determine if the admissions process needs further improvement to eliminate unnecessary barriers to readmittance.

Question 12 is a text-entry box question and asked through what channels the survey participant heard about UW-Stout. This question was designed to gauge effective platforms to continue to use.

Question 13 was a text-entry question and asked for the reasoning behind the survey participant selecting UW-Stout as the school they either returned to or transferred to upon enrollment.

Question 14 was a choice-question designed to gauge whether the survey participant would recommend UW-Stout to others.

The survey questions were designed with one main purpose. The purpose was to identify barriers and challenges the adult learner group faced or currently faces at UW-Stout. In analyzing the results, significant findings could lead to understanding what services and needs this student group needs, especially when applied to a virtual environment. The results could indicate opportunities that can help with recruitment and possible retention initiatives to maintain or increase student enrollment as college institutions continue to operate under unprecedented times.

Data Collection Procedures

The electronic survey was designed using Qualtrics software through UW-Stout to ensure data security and in order to easily distribute the survey among email. In the survey, there was the option of declining whether the participant wanted to remain anonymous. An email template was also drafted by the researcher providing general information on the study being conducted,

which also included the link to the survey. In addition, there was a disclosure made to students both in the email and the survey that stated their personal identities and responses to all questions would remain confidential. The Online Business Management Department was contacted to obtain records of students who possibly could meet the criteria of the adult learner. The survey was then emailed to a contact list pulled from the Online Business Management Department. All the information and data remained anonymous and was stored on a secure network through UW-Stout with the exception of pulling reports for analysis. These were shredded after the results were categorized.

Data Analysis

The survey results were analyzed using quantitative methods and a thematic analysis of answers. Once the survey closed, a report was generated in Qualtrics to pull all results to the survey questions. The quantitative questions helped gauge the number of adult learner survey respondents and basic background demographic while the qualitative research of interviewing students will help gather information about barriers to education. For the thematic analysis, an excel spreadsheet was created to categorize responses among the survey participants. The excel spreadsheet included qualitative questions and all the survey responses to those questions. The research analyzed for similarities based on frequency of responses from the survey participants. That was categorized into themes that surfaced from analyzing the results and produced significant findings with implications for discussion.

Limitations

There were several limitations that were expected as well as unexpectedly occurred throughout the process of conducting research. The data from this survey was pulled from UW-Stout's Online Business Management Department, which only provided a perspective into the

barriers faced by those program students. This may have limited the type of profiles of the adult learner and the number of students reached. For example, UW-Stout is located in Menomonie, WI, both of which are predominately white. This could impact the types of barriers indicated in the survey based on the backgrounds of the students attracted to and attending UW-Stout. In addition, the institutional study was localized to UW-Stout, which arguably produced a smaller sample size that may not be generalizable to the larger population of college students in the United States. One additional limitation is whether students understood the question and took a genuine approach to providing answers that truly represent their college experience. Even with having the forced answers on the survey does not mean an answer will be provided and may have to be omitted. Lastly, the impact of Covid-19 is still newly being understood. The survey was designed with the intent of finding out barriers to improve services through process, which in turn would improve operations. The questions were general and broad and could have benefitted from asking questions relating to Covid-19 and the technology being used to facilitate online learning.

Summary

In summary the data collected gives a glimpse into barriers the adult learner faces at UW-Stout, so that college institutions may proactively respond to the Covid-19 situation and the threat it poses to the livelihood of education. The results do provide a look into what services are missing or need to be improved in order to establish new process or to revamp current ones to adapt to a virtual environment. This will ensure operations continue to run as smoothly as possible as changes from Covid-19 is sure to continue and disrupt the way higher education has been operation and functioning for many years.

Chapter IV: Results

There was a total of 37 participants who completed the survey. Through the data it showed that all of the participants are categorized as adult learners, which is defined as students who are 25 years of age or above. For the purposes of this research, the adult learners were narrowly defined as stop-out or transfer students. Gender did not play a specific part in this research but was used to identify to see if there were any unique trends related to barriers. The survey participants fell into two groups. Group 1 identified as stop-out students: Drop-out of a four-year college institution and returned to college later. Group 2 are students who either transferred from a two or four-year institution into UW-Stout. The distinction between Group 1 and Group 2 was made in order to see if there are any unique barriers related specifically to stop-out students or to transfer students. This will help identify barriers adult learners face when starting, stopping, and re-enrolling into college.

Demographic

In the demographic section, the main purpose was to filter out any participants that did not fall into the adult learner definition. The age groups selected among survey participants did result in all the participants being 25 years of age or older.

Item Analysis

The item analysis section will show the results from the data collected from the survey. Some of the interpretation of data was done through a thematic analysis for specific questions from the survey while other data was interpreted through a quantitative analysis. Furthermore, there will be a description provided for each survey question to interpret the data of the figures shown.

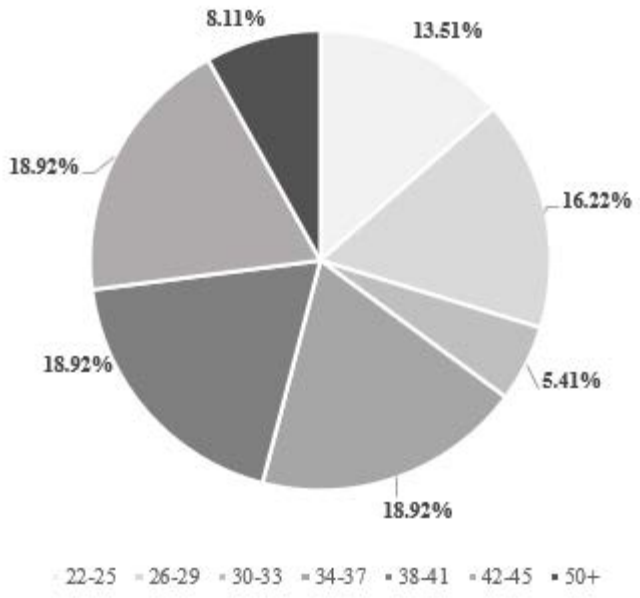

Figure 2. Percentages of survey participants age group.

Research Question 1: What is your age?

This question identifies the age range to ensure each participant met the criteria for an adult learner, which is defined as being 25 years of age or older. Of the 37 survey participants, the results show that 13.5% fell into the first age group of 22-25. Following that, about 16.2% fell into the age group 26-29. A small percentage of 5.4% fell into the age group of 30-33. The results show that 18.9% fell into the age group of 34-37. The same percentage of 18.9% fell into the age group 38-41. The same percentage of 18.9% fell into the age group 42-45. Lastly, 8.1% fell into the 50 or older age group. Although, all the participants fall under the adult learner category, 56 % of the participants fell with the age range of 34-45. In conclusion, the findings show that the majority of the adult learners returning to college after a break in their education ranges from ages 34 to 45 compared to the other age groups. This could be an indicator that within this age group they are coming back to finish their degree for career advancement opportunities. While a small sample size, the results for this research indicates that this age range

could be further discussed and researched to highlight any specific characteristics of individuals in the age range of 34-45 to identify lifestyle and circumstances that could be useful in terms of recruitment purposes and if there is a correlation between this age group and career advancements.

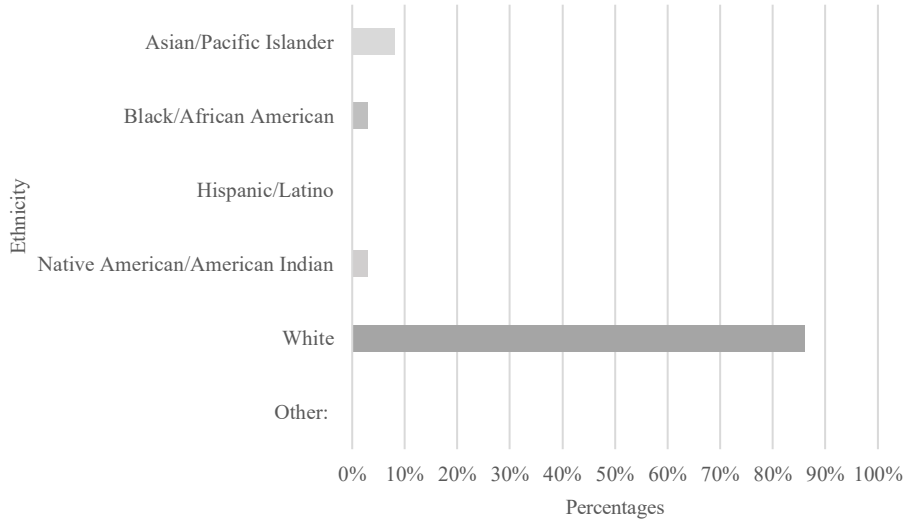

Figure 3. Data indicates ethnic background.

Research Question 2: Please specify your ethnicity**.**

For the findings for Question 2, 8% of survey participants identified as Asian/Pacific Islander; 2% of survey participants identified as Black/African American; 2% of survey participants identified as Native American/American Indian; 86% of survey participants identified as white. The data shows that there is a significantly higher concentration of White or Caucasian students who completed the survey compared to other ethnicities. These findings are not representative of the larger body of students at UW-Stout, but for the purposes of this research it is important to note that majority of the responses were from individuals who identified as white; however, UW-Stout is predominately white. The small number of students from ethnic backgrounds cannot be representative of the larger minority student population at

UW-Stout, but it does bring up concerns on the representation at UW-Stout and resources and support it provides to student from ethnic backgrounds.

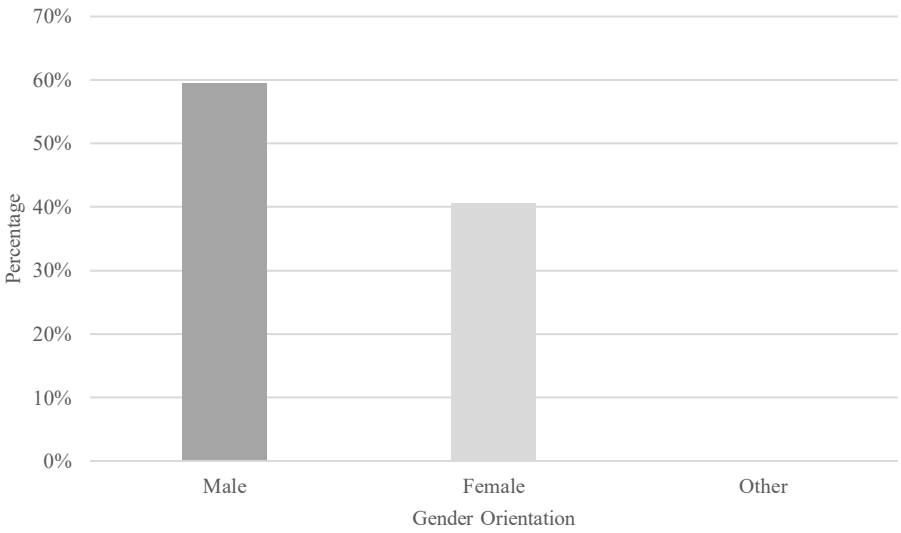

Figure 4. Data for gender identification of survey participants.

Research Question 3: Please select the gender orientation that you identify with most.

For this question, male adult learners make up 59% of the survey responses and female adult learners make up the other 41%. The findings show that a larger percentage of male adult learner students took the survey but not a large enough distinction to make any conclusions as to whether gender is a factor in determining unique barriers related to gender. However, barriers that may exist are specific to gender roles that have cause certain issues for the survey participants. More research on gender roles barriers maybe needed to possible identify other opportunities and its effect on higher education.

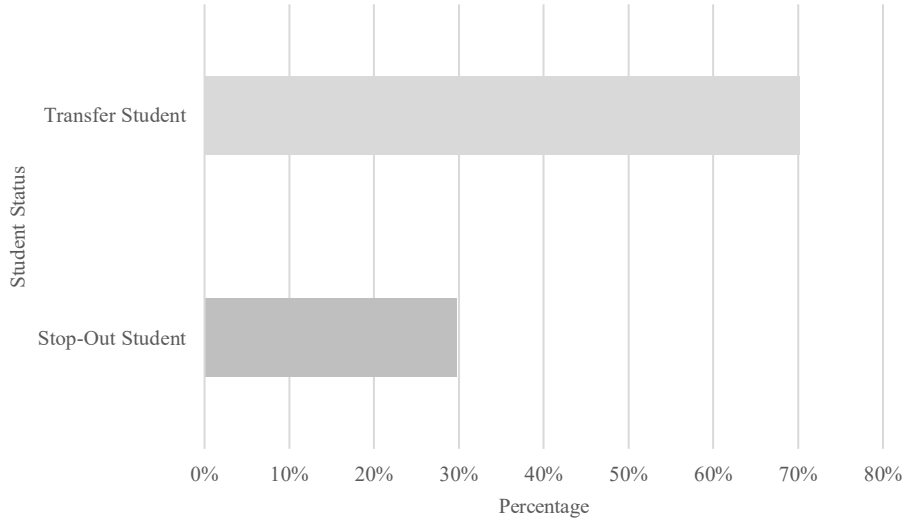

Figure 5: Stop-out and transfer student identification.

Research Question 4: Please select your student status as defined by the definitions below: Stop-out student: A student who attended a four-year college institution (at UW-Stout or elsewhere) as an undergraduate student and withdrew temporarily due to unforeseen circumstances before returning at a later time to complete their degree. This does not include transfer students. To determine your status, the distinction between a transfer student and a stop-out student is that a stop-out student did not intend to interrupt their initial enrollment.

The data shows that 30% of survey participants were stop-out students. In addition, about 70% of survey participants were transfer students. The findings show that most of the survey responses were completed by transfer students. It is important to note that there are different divisions or aspects of the adult learner identity to consider in order to identify specific barriers and services to meet those intersecting needs. However, the survey participants may not have understood what was being asked of them. For transfer students there is either a lateral or vertical transfer. Meaning that vertical transfer students is looking to achieve a bachelor's degree after finishing a two-year degree and then transferred into UW-Stout, or a lateral transfer, where the

survey participant may have dropped out from UW-Stout or a different four-year institution and now re-enrolling at UW-Stout to complete their degrees. This is important to know that stop-out students may have different barriers compared to transfer students. With a large portion being transfer students, UW-Stout could cater their processes and services to this group for recruitment and retention purpose.

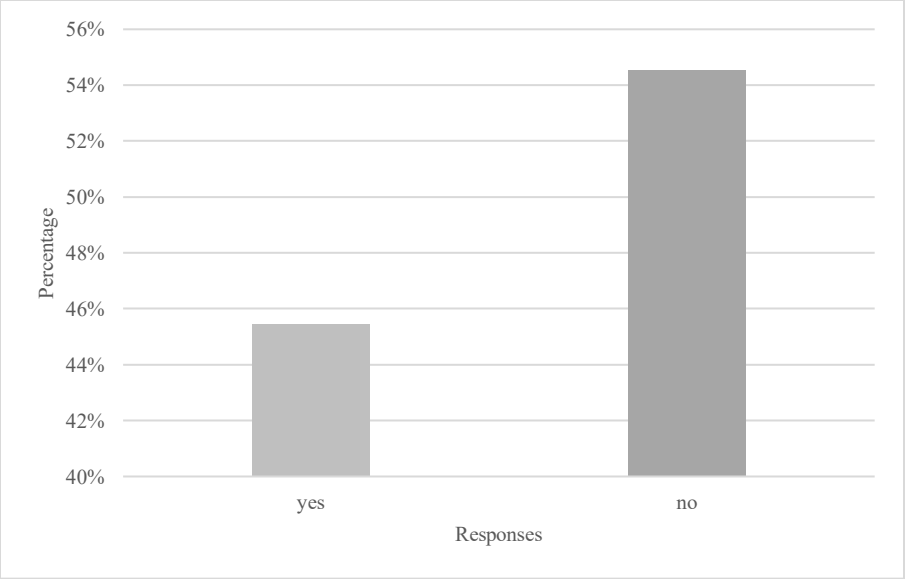

Figure 6. Students previously enrolled at UW-Stout for stop-out students.

Research Question 5: Were you previously enrolled at UW-Stout at any time?

The survey branched out for students indicating they were stop-out students to determine if any were previous UW-Stout students. Of the 11 stop-out students, 5 survey responses indicated they attended UW-Stout at an earlier point in time and re-enrolled later, which is 45% of that small number. The findings provide useful information from an institutional study to help UW-Stout figure out if there are any unique trends specific to the institution. By looking at internal information UW-Stout can identify students who have stopped out and look at recruitment opportunities for stop-out students who have dropped out from UW-Stout.

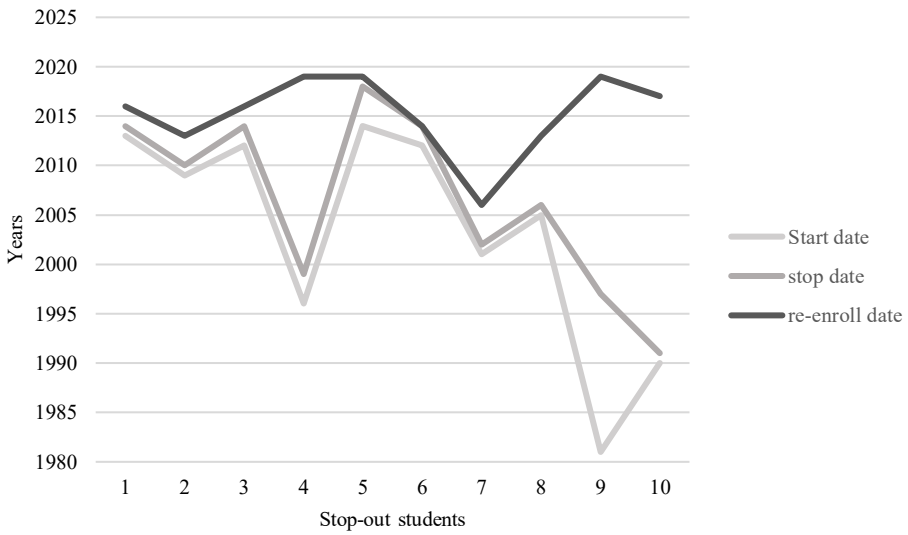

Figure 7. Time range of break in education for stop-out students.

Research Question 6: What year did you begin your first enrollment as an undergraduate student? This is defined as your first time enrolling as an undergraduate student at a four-year institution.

Research Question 7: What year did you stop-out of your undergraduate career? This is defined as the year you left after your first enrollment at a four-year institution.

Research Question 8: What year did you re-enroll in college? This is defined as the year you returned to college after stopping out.

Figure 6 combines data from questions 6, 7, and 8 that pertained to only stop-out students, which make up 30% of survey responses to show when students started their initial undergraduate studies, when they stopped out, and when they decided to re-enroll. Unfortunately, 1 participant answer was omitted due to no response. In conclusion, it is significant to note that 6 of the 10 stop-out students re-enrolled with a five-year time frame while the other 4 took a period of 10 years or longer to re-enroll. Understanding why the survey participants came back to college presents ideas on how to cater to other adult learners in a

recruitment effort. Also, knowing reasons why student drop out of college can help with current retentions for the traditional students.

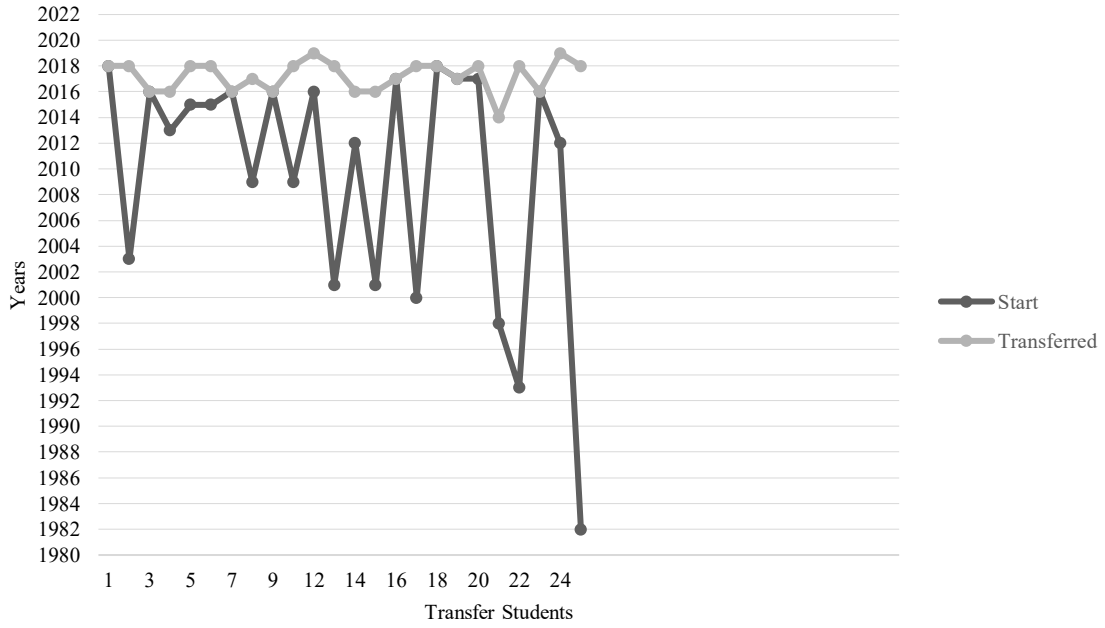

Figure 8. Time of transfer between institutions for transfer students.

Research Question 6: What year did you begin your first enrollment as an undergraduate student? This is defined as your first time enrolling as an undergraduate student at a two-year or four-year institution.

Research Question 7: What year did you transfer to UW-Stout?

For this figure, Qusetion 6 and 7 were combined and pertained only to transfer students. The results show that 26 of 37 students transferred to UW-Stout from either a two-or-four-year insitituion. Note: There were 2 of the 26 participants whose responses were omitted due to no repsonses. In Figure 7, it is notable that transfer students who attended prior to 2010 had a large gap of time between their initial enrollment and transfer date. The reason for this being is unknown. For transfer students, the time from when students started to the transfer date shows no specific average but that there is a length of time or break before they offically transferred to

UW-Stout. Again, while the reasons are unknown it is an opportunity to discuss if that time lapse can be eliminated or addressed if related to barriers. On the other hand, this also could be an opportunity of recruitment purpose as majority of the survey participants are adult learners, and it would allow for transfer student to be able to transfer sooner to four-year institution instead of waiting as along as the data shows.

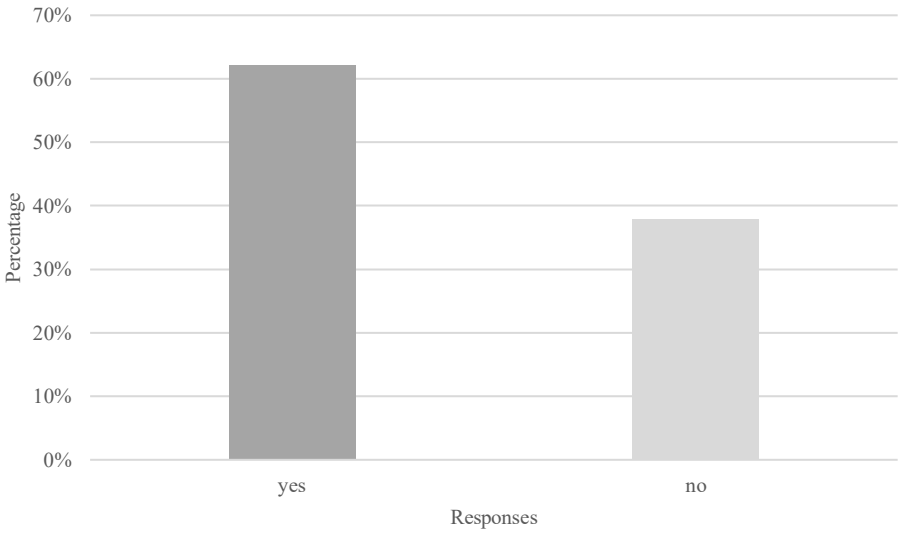

Figure 9. Employment during college.

Research Question 8: If you were/are employed at the time of re-enrolling in college, did your place of employment offer tuition reimbursement?

The findings show that 62% of survey participants were employed at the time of their college enrollment and that their employer did offer tuition reimbursement. Furthermore, 38% stated that while they were employed their employers did not offer tuition reimbursement. In conclusion, it is significant to note this data because tuition reimbursement could be a motivation for why the adult learner returns to complete their college degree. However, also understanding why student who came back without tuition reimbursement may also shed some light on other motivations to come back to college.

Inferring to the data that tuition reimbursement may be a big factor in why there are adult learners re-enrolling. This could be an area of opportunity where UW-Stout can try to partner up with other business or even industries to see if they provide or work towards a plan of establishing tuition reimbursement.

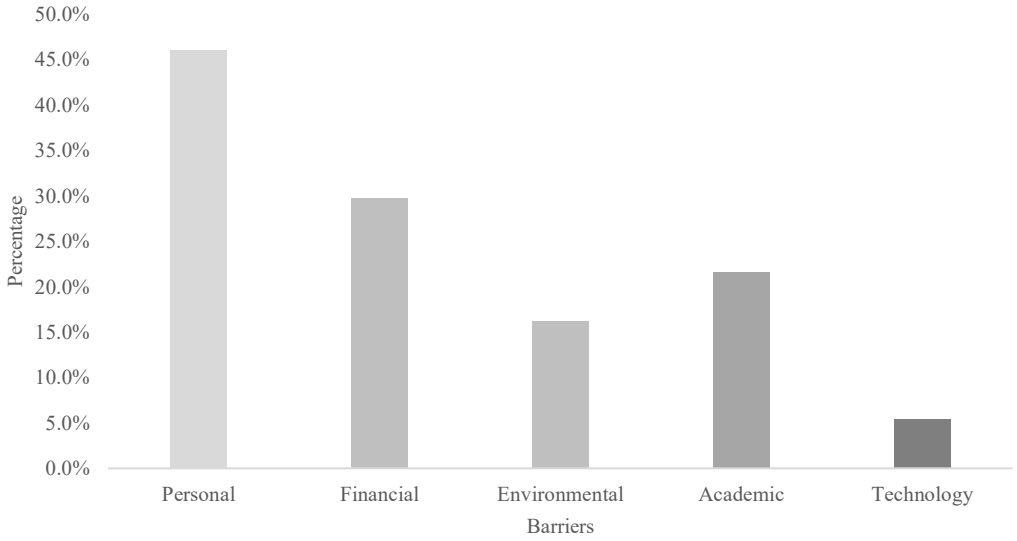

Figure 10. Barriers adult learners face in higher ed.

Research Question 9: Please select all the barriers that you have experienced as a stop-out/ transfer college student? For a more descriptive context each of the barriers are defined as: Personal is defined as, family obligations, personal health and well-being, family issues, home sickness, major life event or crisis, etc. Financial, (lack of financial aid, lack of access to loans, financial problems, lack of financial knowledge, lack of financial resources, or no job/needed job, etc.). Environmental, (lack of or unsatisfied with environmental factors: counseling services, advising services, academic support services, extra-curricular activities, student clubs or organizations, faculty, and departmental support, etc.). Academic, (academic aptitudes, self-efficacy, self-esteem or self-confidence, study habits, lack of preparation for college, GPA, and Grades). Technology, (lack of access to needed programs, lack of understanding on how to use

technology tools offered, difficulty of navigating online learning, etc.), and an "others," sections in case there were any other barriers that may have been missed.

The findings showed what barriers students selected that they faced while in college. 46% of survey participants stated that personal barriers were struggle in college. 30% of survey participants stated that there was some sort of financial barrier. In addition, 16% of survey participants stated that they experienced environmental barriers. For academic barriers, about 22% stated they struggled in this area. Lastly, 6% of survey participants stated they experienced technology-related barriers. While all types of barriers affected these students' academic progress, it is significant to note that personal barriers were highly selected among the survey participants.

This question provided a content box to list the specific nature of their situations in correlation to the barrier selected. In doing a thematic analysis of the content provided by the survey participants, there was a common theme of concerns related to balancing work, school, and life responsibilities. Specifically, dealing with family issues and obligations.

Alongside other barriers, personal barriers and financial barriers was also highly selected among the survey participants. In doing a thematic analysis of these responses, students expressed concerns including: "severe financial issues causing homelessness," a "lack of money, needed a job," "worked full-time while a student made it difficult." One participant mentioned that the employer stop paying for courses.

Through the thematic analysis for personal barriers, it reflects the lack preparation of what to expect in college. As this may be the first-time student is living away from home it may be overwhelming to support him or herself. It may also be said that there may have been little to no support when going to college. On top of that, life events do happen to people that make them

drop out of college, which was the scenario for some such as having a child or putting family for education.

Financial barrier is ranked second of all the barriers listed and through the thematic data lack of money management and the lack of money made it difficult for most survey participants to stay in college, but two things happened. One, the survey participant got jobs to be able to survive during college, but then could not focus on school, which led to dropping out. The second is that the money being made at the job was too good and the student decided to pursue the career without trying to finish college, putting money first.

The next barrier highly selected by survey participants was academic barriers. Pertaining to this area, survey participants revealed that there was a lack of self-preparation and confidence when attending college. Specifically, one participant said, “I felt very unprepared for school. I made a valiant effort and really tried. I lacked self-confidence because I felt like I was under-valued because I had no-one of worth backing me.” Another participant said, “I often struggled with motivation and procrastination. My addiction led me to not being prepared or organized. With the help for staff, I overcame these obstacles.”

Academic barriers ranked third in the listed barriers and through the thematic data the trends show that survey participants were not academically prepared for college. This does raise the question to see if curriculum that is being taught at the high school level preparing student for college? Furthermore, what are college institutions doing to make sure that students who are unprepared doing to get the support they need to succeed in college? However, not all students are unprepared academically, but by bridging the gap of those who are struggling could help with retention purposes.

In terms of environmental barriers, it is significant to note that this also had an effect on student performance. Survey participants indicated there as a lack of support from a personal and an institutional aspect. One participant said, “No one has been very helpful at any institution I’ve been at.” When college is supposed to be a place to learn and grow with the support of the institution and its staff, there seems to be a lack of student support or are not being provided the resources that the student may need, which may lead to a higher risk of students dropping out.

However, there were one positive experience with a participant saying, “The faculty were most adaptive and supportive in all aspects and at all times. Through my entire ordeal I was always treated with respect and given the highest support to succeed.” With the varying responses, the survey participants may not have understood the definition of what constitutes as environmental barriers.

Lastly, technology barriers were not a huge factor but was selected as a barrier. Participants cited that most of the technology barriers were minor, but with assistance, they were able to resolve technological issues.

In summary personal, financial, and academic barriers are the largest burdens that these survey participants faced as students, which is in line with much of what the literature shows. Institutions still need to improve these services, especially when adapting to an online learning environment to include not only the curricular side but the student services side.

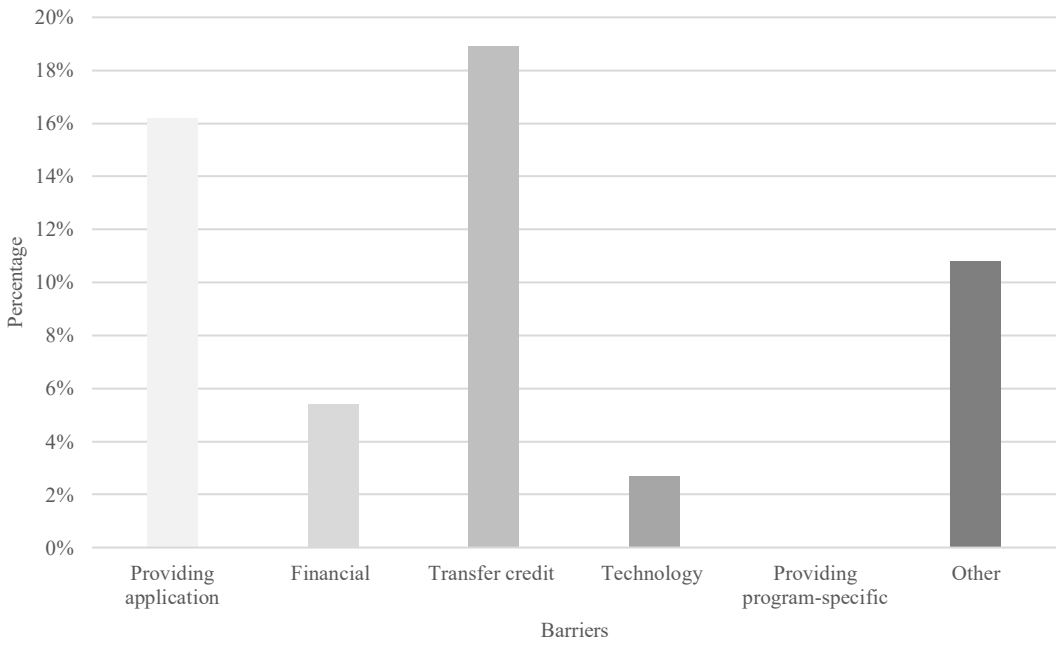

Figure 11. Barriers and obstacles in application process.

Research Question 10: During the transfer/re-enrolling process, did you experience any barriers or obstacles that made it difficult to finalize your application or decision to attend UW-Stout?

16% stated that providing application materials and documents were an obstacle in the application process. 5% financial aid such as FAFSA was an obstacle in the application process. 19 % said transfer credit policies were an obstacle in the application process. None of the survey participant had issues with having to provide program materials such as a portfolio led to an obstacle in the application progress. 3% said that access to technology to complete applications and communicate with appropriate offices was an obstacle in the application process. 11% chose "other" as an obstacle.

This question provided a content box to list the specific nature of their situations in correlation to the barrier/obstacle selected. In the thematic analysis of the responses provided, the two most notable barriers in the data for the participants were assistance with the application

materials and transferring of credits to UW-Stout. In terms of the application materials, it was a tedious process, but one participant noted: “The math placement has been the biggest struggle.” For the transfer credit policy, one participant said: “The math I’ve taken wouldn’t transfer. I feel like more of my classes should have transferred to something useful.” With departments that helped with transfer credits, one participant said: “Again, the Dept head for Business Management approved additional life credits and transfer credits allowing me a path to graduation and removing barriers.” This is significant in that transfer polices may be a barrier that needs addressing. For adult learners who are transferring or re-enrolling into college, responses indicate that there seems to be process-based improvements that can be made to eliminate any barriers, pinpoint steps where students struggle in the process, and to identify if new steps or services are needed to provide further guidance.

Research Question 11: Through what means did you hear about the University of WI-Stout? (e.g., friends, family, online, social media, referral, etc.).

In analyzing the results, the top responses to this question in terms of learning about UW-Stout was through friends and family, online searches, referral from another institution, or the locality to their living situation. Because the largest response for promotion of UW-Stout comes from family and friends, this significant finding can help identify new advertising or promotional methods to help with branding. It also indicates that word of mouth is still an effective and powerful tool, which is a reminder to college institutions that customer satisfaction is of utmost importance.

Research Question 12: Please describe or list the reasons that led you to choose the University of WI-Stout?

As results, there were various responses to this question, but the top three responses include: Online programs, programs offered, and transferable credit to the institution. For online programs, one participant said, “Online courses are a huge benefit while working full time with family obligations.” In terms of programs offered, one participant said, “UW-Stout was the only one that offered my program.” The findings are significant in showing what UW-Stout is doing well and can reveal what should be further improved or expanded to meet adult learners’ needs as well as other students, especially in a time of Covid-19.

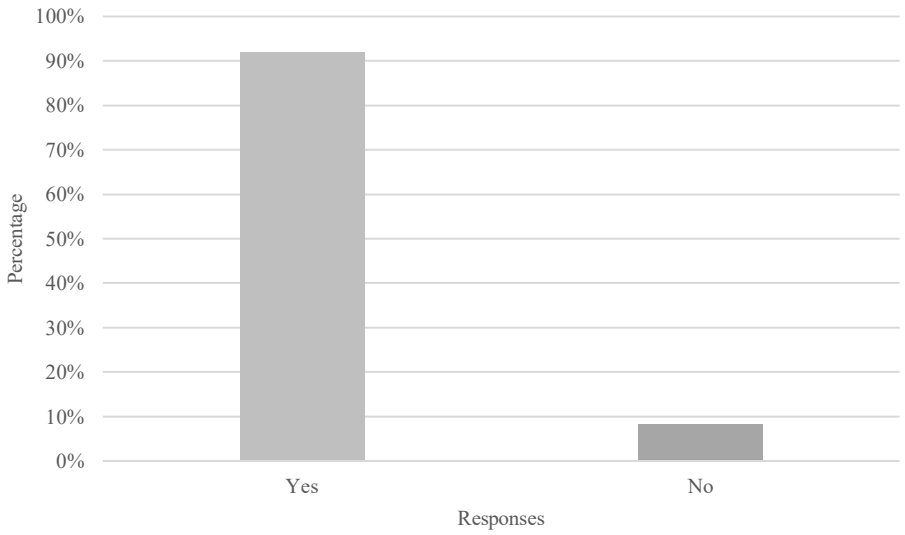

Figure 12. Student recommendation of UW-Stout to prospective students.

Research Question 13: Would you recommend UW-Stout to someone else?

For the survey responses, 92% of survey participants said they would recommend UW - Stout to other students. Only 8% said they would not recommend UW - Stout to other students.

This question provided a content box to provide further explanation to their response. There was a common theme of flexibility of courses and choices of programs. In addition, there were other responses to note. One participant said, “Stout has quality staff that want to ensure success. With such a high graduation and job placement Stout offers excellent post grad

support.” One other participant provided interesting input, “I would suggest because it’s not expensive and they have a lot of options, but I wouldn’t suggest because they don’t offer a lot of assistance in planning your college journey.” For this individual, while tuition costs were appealing, this does show that not only does the student need to be satisfied with the program or curriculum design but that there needs to be more student services support to ensure success.

Chapter V: Discussion, Conclusion and Recommendation

As the research shows, Covid-19 brought many challenges regarding student recruitment and student retention, which continues to be an ongoing concern in higher education. By understanding why adult learners are coming back to college, it can be beneficial for college institutions to improve recruitment and retention efforts to maintain student enrollment during the pandemic. The purpose of this study was to identify barriers that affect adult learners and to be able to predict their needs in an online learning environment. This will allow for a college institution to identify services needed for the improvement of retention and recruitment processes.

Through the process of surveying adult learners at UW-Stout, there were some findings that illuminated possible solutions to increase student enrollment. The focus was to not only to improve curricular needs and designs but to expand student services by taking a holistic approach to identify academic and personal barriers and to revamp or implement new services in an online environment. Change Management theory including organizational and operational development were proposed as possible methods to acclimate students, staff, and faculty to new changes and also to address implementation of processes for services needed. However, there were limitations in need of discussion. The methodology could benefit from improvements in order for other college institutions who are interested in increasing student enrollment to model after to maximize and get more accurate results. There are several areas that can use further discussion including survey design, pool of participants, analysis tools, and research on COVID-19. What follows is a summary of recommendations for other college institutions looking to create a holistic online environment.

Discussion

In terms of the first limitation, the survey design including the questions is an area that can be improved to gather more details and data. There were two adult learner groups this study aimed to gather information for, which included transfer students and stop-out students. There was a limitation in that survey participants may have not fully understood the terms and definitions, which may have affected the accuracy of results. While there is overlap in circumstances for both groups, with stop-out students possibly identifying as transfer students and vice versa, it would be helpful to further define these terms in future research. The intent of the student is what makes the difference for these two groups. The original purpose of this study was to only do research on stop-out students but because it was a difficult target group, the participants were expanded to include transfer students, with characteristics of both groups falling into the adult learner category. Stop-out students was defined as beginning their undergraduate career with the intent of continuity in their education. Transfer students may have started with the intent to transfer from a 2-year or 4-year university for a variety of reasons. For the stop-out students, the survey was designed to branch off with questions pertaining to barriers that led to dropping out to better understand areas in need of improvement. For transfer students, the questions pertaining to barriers applied as well as questions related to the transfer admissions process. Future research should consider studying the adult learner altogether in a general category and then designing specific questions that apply to each scenario in a more streamline and less confusing way.

As for the questions of the survey, more detailed questions targeting various characteristics and life circumstances of the adult learner to provide stronger evidence of the specific type of barriers. This can help pinpoint more specific areas in the adult learner's life that

the college institution can turn into services needed. For example, if daycare presents challenges then the college institution can take initiative to create campus resources or provide community resources to serve this need. Instead of only asking general questions about personal barriers, questions specifically addressing what types of personal barriers may be more helpful in determining services. Many participants indicated family obligations but did not provide further insight in the textbox provided in the survey. Without the opportunity for follow-up questions, there was not enough qualitative information to reach strong conclusions. The survey format is helpful because of efficiency and for data collection purposes, but other college institutions may consider doing focus groups or individual interviews to allow for follow-up questions and further discussion of barriers.

The second limitation of this study was the pool of participants that could be improved on because the survey participants were from the Customized Instruction from UW-Stout, specifically the Online Business Management program. By expanding the sample size to other academic departments, it would not limit the results to just one department. While helpful to do an institutional study, future researchers may expand their focus to include students from other college institutions. This would provide more generalized information across both traditional and non-traditional student which could be of use to any institution looking to reach other student demographics from diverse backgrounds. With UW-Stout being a predominantly white institution and considering that recent research on Covid-19 shows that there is a disproportionate impact on minority students, it would have benefited UW-Stout to include data from minority-serving institutions. This allows for more data related to intersecting layers of student identities. Through intentional targeting, more data could reveal important trends that

will identify other barriers and services needed and ultimately would lead to increased and innovative retention and recruitment efforts.

Another factor to consider in maximizing results is for future researchers to establish a better methodology or targeting and distribution of the survey. Taking a look at the spreadsheet of students provided by the Customized Instruction office to verify the contact information could have led to more responses. Additionally, it would have been useful to have other methods of distribution then just emailing the survey to the sample size. This could have expanded more results since not everyone checks email, has access to old email accounts, and could have avoided missing participants due to emails being directed into the junk or spam folder. Additionally, the researcher sent out the survey to identified adult learners, but future researchers could consider sending it to point people within specific offices, programs, and departments. Often, students are more likely to respond if it comes from a connection or familiar face on campus.

The other aspect related to maximizing survey responses the length of time the survey was available to students. For this study, it was conducted toward the end of fall 2019 into early spring 2020. The winter break could have affected the number of survey responses. A recommendation would be to extend the timeframe to be longer and to distribute it during reasonable times in the semester.

The third limitation of this study was the analysis tools that were used. The tools used were the online Qualtrics Survey Software and Microsoft Excel. The survey was designed using Qualtrics because of the ability to remain secure, to collect data, and to produce reports with aggregate data. This tool was easy to use in terms of designing questions, but there were issues with analyzing for thematic responses from the reports that were generated. Microsoft Excel was

used to code content responses and then a thematic analysis was done to find common themes. For future researchers, looking into other software that is user friendly and that could tabulate data more efficiently could be beneficial. Other software's may have better analysis tools to interpret the data being collect.

The fourth limitation of the study was the research available on Covid-19. The timeframe of when the study was being conducted began at the start of the pandemic. The researcher followed the ongoing developments and collected research on how the virus was affecting college institutions as well as how administrators were responding to the pandemic. Since the pandemic is new territory for higher education, the fiscal and operational impact it had on college institutions was still developing. At the time of the publication of this research, more information and data are now available regarding the impact of Covid-19. For future researchers, it would be important to incorporate new research and data to determine if there are other factors that need to be considered in trying to maintain and increase student enrollment. It would also be helpful to determine if the direction of holistic online learning and services is the best direction in terms of cost and operations.

Recommendation

There are recommendations from this research study that can be considered for implementation. The findings support the literature review that services and processes could be improved, especially in an online environment. This would give UW-Stout an opportunity to revamp the landscape of their institution during a pivotal time and in turn increase or stabilize enrollment. In addition, it can also help create new initiatives or strategic plans for a better recruitment process as there are still many unknowns about the pandemic.

The first recommendation is to expand services online and to house it in a centralized location for easy access. This provides a holistic online presence that supports students with comprehensive services. It is important to address curricular design just as much as it is to address the advising side of student needs. The data revealed that there are adult learners who are enrolling or coming back to college even after a lapse in time. This may be an indication that the industry is requiring education for advancement, salary raises, or it could also mean the workplace is getting more competitive as younger graduates come in with more up-to-date knowledge. There may be an opportunity for researchers to look specifically into this area to see if there is enough data to generalize and create new initiatives. One initiative is to find an online platform that can create a culture and environment where all services are centralized for UW-Stout's online adult learner population. If a website can house all student services in one place, it will help with navigation and accessibility. This can create more involvement and engagement from the student who is a distance leaner and often feels disconnected from the campus community and resources. Currently, when looking at the current platform, it does not offer full accessibility to all its services to online learners—student services like financial aid, counseling services, advisement, disability services, multicultural student services, etc. These offices function as silos with their own processes. By creating an environment where online students can have access to all these services streamlined in one place, it may provide a better holistic approach. By implementing this for adult learners, it ultimately also would serve the needs of all students as Covid-19 forces more online learning and virtual services. UW-Stout would have to assess current platforms for effectiveness and possibly do additional research on other platforms and technology that would best aid them in the process of creating a centralized support system and the delivery of those services.

The second recommendation is to create a student survey to assess for barriers and needs on a continuous basis and then build on that to enhance services provided to students at UW-Stout who are adult learners online. This can even include the general student population for both online and at the institution itself. As student retention is always a concern for higher education, and with the current conditions of the pandemic, the survey will consistently provide direct feedback to assure that services are meeting the needs of the students. A committee may be tasked with analyzing the data in order to put forth new initiatives. This is a sure way to stay up to date with the changing needs of students.

The last recommendation for UW-Stout is to use change management as a concept to implement new changes. As mentioned, change management is important as it can help modernize institutional practices. Although change may be difficult, there needs to be change on two fronts: on an operational level and an organizational level. On the organizational level, task forces need to be formed to help address emotional concerns of students, staff, and faculty and to help facilitate change at UW-Stout. It is difficult to expect people to be on board without consulting for advice and feedback as much of the deep-rooted practices in place provide stability, familiarity, and comfort. Another task force would also be needed for change on an operational level. This task force would oversee data and research to identify barriers and student needs in order to offer recommendations on implementing new processes for a better flow of change and buy-in from employees at UW-Stout.

These recommendations can lead to better academic programming for UW-Stout and other college institutions. Taking a holistic assessment and assigning tasks to committees and task forces will help improve the learning experience for students who may be quickly adapting to online learning.

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Appendix: Survey Questions

1. What is your age?

- 18-21
- 22-25
- 26-29
- 30-33
- 34-37
- 38-41
- 42-45
- 50+

2. Please specify your ethnicity: - Selected Choice

- Asian
- American Indian or Alaskan Indian
- Black or African American
- Hispanic/ Latino
- Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
- White
- Other

3. Please select the gender orientation that you identify with most: - Selected Choice

- Male
- Female
- Other

4. Please select your student status as defined by the definitions below: Stop-out student: A student who attended a four-year college institution (at UW-Stout or elsewhere) as an undergraduate student and withdrew temporarily due to unforeseen circumstances before returning later to complete their degree. This does not include transfer students. To determine your status, the distinction between a transfer student and a stop-out student is that a stop-out student did not intend to interrupt their initial enrollment. Transfer student: A student who began their college academic career at one institution (including two-year colleges) and transferred credits to UW-Stout to finish their education. Two types: Type 1 - Vertical Transfer (or a traditional, forward, upward): A student transfers from a two-

year institution to a four-year institution. Type 2 - Lateral Transfer: A student transfers from a four-year institution to another four-year institution.

- Stop-put student
- Transfer student

5. Were you previously enrolled at UW-Stout at any time?

- Yes
- No

6. What year did you begin your first enrollment as an undergraduate student? This is defined as your first time enrolling as an undergraduate student at a four-year institution.

_____

7. What year did you stop-out of your undergraduate career? This is defined as the year you left after your first enrollment at a four-year institution.

_____

8. What year did you re-enroll in college? This is defined as the year you returned to college after stopping out.

_____

9. If you were/are employed at the time of re-enrolling in college, did your place of employment offer tuition reimbursement?

- Yes
- No

10. Please select all the barriers that you have experienced as a stop-out/ transfer college student?

- Personal is defined as, family obligations, personal health and well-being, family issues, home sickness, major life event or crisis, etc.
- Financial, (lack of financial aid, lack of access to loans, financial problems, lack of financial knowledge, lack of financial resources, or no job/needed job, etc.)

- o Environmental, (lack of or unsatisfied with environmental factors: counseling services, advising services, academic support services, extra-curricular activities, student clubs or organizations, faculty, and departmental support, etc.).
- o Academic, (academic aptitudes, self-efficacy, self-esteem or self-confidence, study habits, lack of preparation for college, GPA, and Grades).
- o Technology, (lack of access to needed programs, lack of understanding on how to use technology tools offered, difficulty of navigating online learning, etc.)
- o Other: _____

11. During the transfer/ re-enrollment process, did you experience any barriers or obstacles that made it difficult to finalize your application or decision to attend UW-Stout?

- o Providing application materials and documentation (e.g., high school transcripts, all institutional transcripts from other colleges, immunization records, ACT/SAT scores, placement tests scores, etc.)
- o Transfer credit policies (e.g., transfer credit limitations, GPA)
- o Providing program-specific materials (e.g., portfolio)
- o Technology (lack of access to email for communications, lack of access to needed programs, lack of understanding on how to use technology tools offered, difficulty of navigating online learning, etc.)
- o Other (orientation process, assistance selecting or enrolling in classes, accessibility issues, etc.)

12. Through what means did you hear about the University of WI-Stout? (e.g., friends, family, online, social media, referral, etc.)

_____

13. Please describe or list the reasons that led you to choose the University of WI-Stout?

_____

14. Would you recommend UW-Stout to someone else?

- o Yes
- o No