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Completion agenda for baby boomers

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A group of nine community colleges is turning to some decidedly nontraditional students to help advance President Obama's goal for the United States to have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world by 2020: baby boomers looking to return to or remain in the workplace.

Mary Sue Vickers, director of the American Association of Community Colleges's Plus 50 Initiative, made the case for the institutions' efforts earlier this month at AACC's annual meeting in New Orleans. With 78 million baby boomers entering their retirement years — and more of them living healthier, longer lives — there is great demand, she argued, for offerings designed to retrain the over-50 population for new careers.

"To meet future demands, we need to prolong the labor force participation of aging baby boomers," said Vickers, noting that unemployed older adults tend to take longer than their younger counterparts to find work. "We need to increase educational opportunities for the current work force."

The Lumina Foundation for Education has funded the Plus 50 Completion Strategy — a supplemental effort to the existing AACC initiative — at Cape Cod Community College, Clover Park Technical College, College of Central Florida, Joliet Junior College, Metropolitan Community College (in Missouri), Northeast Wisconsin Technical College, Pasco-Hernando Community College, Santa Fe College and Wake Technical Community College. These nine institutions are encouraging people over 50 who have earned college credits in the past to complete a degree or certificate. They are also encouraging employers of plus-50 adults to send current employees back to college. The effort hopes to bring 40 percent of the individuals it attracts to "completion," earning either a certificate or an associate degree, by 2014.

Rosemary Dillon, dean of health sciences at Cape Cod Community College, said there is a critical need to further educate the baby boomer population in her institution's service area. A third of Cape Cod's population is over 60. In addition, recent census data show that its under-18 population has declined significantly in the past decade.

To attract boomers to the college, Dillon said, her institution recently staged a "career changers" conference to highlight the changing "employment forecast" for the future of the Cape. The event featured a number of workshops for attendees. Some of the topics included "generational differences in the workplace" and "what it's like to be an older student on a college campus."

"When this was over, I stood in the middle of campus ... and I did not see one person who didn't come out of this with a big smile on their face and say, 'This is great,' " said Dillon, noting that the event attracted 180 local residents. She explained that boomers simply need to be shown that they are welcome on college campuses and that institutions have programs specifically to benefit them.

To assist older students interested in returning to college, Dillon said her institution created an "adult learner services center" that identifies current skills, provides career counseling, refers students to other support services, and helps track students through their certificate or degree program.

Mabel Edmonds, dean of workforce development at Clover Park Technical College, in Washington, noted that her institution has also created a "single point of contact" adviser to provide support services to plus-50 adults. It also hosted a career expo specifically for this population, at which the college educated local employers about the value of hiring older, more-experienced workers.

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Ultimately, though, those involved with the Plus 50 Completion Strategy stressed that colleges hoping to attract older students need to enhance their marketing and branding efforts.

“For instance, does your college catalog have people like that,” said Vickers, pointing to a photograph of a group of gray-haired and bespectacled students, “or do they look like typical 18-year-olds?”

Also important, Vickers and the other officials said, is having baby boomers tell their own stories about being downsized and seeking retraining. This, more than any marketing technique, they argued, has the greatest impact on other boomers. YouTube videos of over-50 students in retraining programs, talking about the experience of being back in the classroom, are popular recruiting tools for many colleges.

The outreach effort at the participating institutions has already attracted a number of such students, all with their own stories about what brought them back to college.

“I was laid off, and I spent 25 years in real estate title business,” said Susan Martin, a student at Joliet Junior College, in one of the program’s many video testimonials. “My time has come. It’s time to switch, not only [because] of the economy but because of the time spent.”

Martin has earned a human resource certification at Joliet and is working toward an associate degree. She is now an instructor with a work-certified program for her area’s workforce investment board -- a group that directs government funds to help retrain unemployed workers. She explained that she was nervous about returning to college at first, but eventually became comfortable with it.

“You’re never too old to learn,” Martin said. “I think it keeps you young. It’s been wonderful.... I’ve met so many wonderful people going through different phases in their lives. It’s been such a fabulous opportunity. And, actually, it led me to find out what I want to be when I grow up.... It’s wonderful reinventing yourself. Just be open to all of the opportunities presented.”

— **David Moltz**