

Accessibility, Flexibility Lead to Diversity at University of Phoenix

Not since the G.I. Bill of Rights of World War II have so many adults sought higher education. Before the war, college was mostly a pursuit of the privileged, an unattainable dream for the average American. But after the 1944 passage of the bill, millions of veterans now found the doors of academe wide open and welcoming, regardless of race, religion or socioeconomic standing. In the peak year of 1947, veterans accounted for 49 percent of college admissions.

Today, the adult learner has again become a significant force in higher education. According to the Association for Nontraditional Students in Higher Education, students over the age of 25 make up 47 percent of the new and returning college student population. Yet this time around, many traditional institutions have been less than accommodating when it comes to the needs of the modern adult learner—and, in particular, of the working student.

“Working people, whether returning to the classroom or taking their first steps into higher education, have a unique set of requirements that often go unmet by traditional institutions,” says University of Phoenix president Bill Pepicello. “Working adults have more complex responsibilities than the traditional 18- or 19-year-old that has gone straight out of high school into college. Jobs, families, mortgages, and personal, social, and professional obligations all profoundly impact these students’ abilities to access the resources most schools offer and to achieve their educational goals.”

The older institutional model of daytime classes, intractable course schedules, 9-to-5 services and often-exclusionary admissions policies puts higher education out of reach for most working students. Their circumstances are as frustrating today as they were 30 years ago, when the situation impelled a visionary educator to create a new university model based on accessibility, flexibility and inclusivity—a model of success that became University of Phoenix.

Relates Pepicello, “Long ago, John Sperling, the University’s founder, recognized a need for some type of educational program that let adult students pursue higher learning without putting their work and personal lives on hold.” That idea was incubated in a program focused on providing police officers and firefighters with the opportunity to continue their education, one which offered degree programs for those who wanted to reposition themselves for new careers after retirement. “There were no evening programs, no facilities, no educational services open to these public servants after hours,” says Pepicello, “but they still needed access to higher education if they were going to better themselves.” So emerged the social agenda on which the University was founded.

Adam Honea, University of Phoenix provost, adds, “We wanted to offer working adults an education on their own terms, so we came up with a model that literally changed the institutional setting.” The University’s for-profit underpinning—and the scalability of the model—allowed for continuous expansion and provided the financial resources to open new campuses around the country, bringing the learning directly to the students. And the school’s mission of accessibility would take a radical new direction in 1989, when the University became the first in academe to offer classes online, using a wide area network for students and teachers to interact and correspond digitally—a program that would expand significantly with the growth of the World Wide Web in the early 1990s.

But while its range of online programs—more than 100 in such applied practices as business, technology, education and health care—have propelled the University to its current level of popularity, it still retains a brick-and-mortar presence in more than 200 communities around the globe. Some classes are held in stand-alone buildings designed specifically for school use, while others are located in office and industrial parks. The University’s classrooms are all strategically located based on population densities, concentrations of online students, and ease of access—again, with the intent of putting educational resources within easy reach. “Not only do these student learning centers offer the option of attending regular classes,” says Pepicello, “but they bring a variety of services to both campus-based and online students, whether it’s tutoring, academic advising or providing space for team meetings. Sometimes online students need or want face-to-face interactions.”

That vision of an institution designed around the life and learning characteristics of working adults, pioneering new approaches to curricular and program design, and making knowledge accessible both physically and digitally, has raised the University to a leading position as the largest private higher education institution in North America. Currently, more than 390,000 students are enrolled. Brian Lindquist, dean of the University’s College of Graduate Business and Management, explains the phenomenal growth succinctly. “We give people an opportunity to learn and earn degrees when the traditional environment is closed off,” Lindquist says. “If traditional schools were accessible, there would be no need for us.”

The demand for a highly skilled, highly trained workforce is greater than ever in America, and University of Phoenix’s blended model of business and education, broadening the reach of academe, is working to assure that a reliable stream of qualified workers will be ready to meet the nation’s needs both today and tomorrow.

A History of Diversity, a Legacy of Relevance

University of Phoenix’s success partially comes from focusing on what students require rather than what is convenient or traditional for the institution. And chief among those student demands is a flexibility that goes well beyond simply offering a handful of evening classes. As Honea explains, a truly flexible education allows students to choose the time of day and even day of the week they’ll dedicate to their studies, whether they’re attending courses at a learning center or working from their computer at home. Indeed, online students quickly discover how they can precisely mold their educational experience to their own professional and personal requirements. However, with flexibility comes the added responsibility of self-motivation.

In the University programs, online courses can be taken over a period of five to six weeks, with small stress-relieving breaks in between. Students aren’t required to be “present” for class at specific times and locations, since lectures and discussions are ongoing constantly. What’s more, wherever their travels take them, students can continue their coursework with just a computer and an Internet connection. Still, while online classes offer greater flexibility than traditional courses, they are just as rigorous academically—and require as much time to complete. The energy and commitment needed

to succeed online is the same or perhaps even greater than that of conventional programs.

That flexibility and accessibility have been hallmarks of the University for decades—and have contributed greatly to a history of achievement in providing access to typically underserved populations. The University’s mission of serving the needs of working students has become, in some regards, an “Education Bill of Rights,” delivering to all the opportunity of higher education regardless of race, religion or class.

More than 43 percent of the University’s enrollment consists of students from underrepresented racial or ethnic communities—well beyond the institutional average nationwide. According to the National Association of College Admissions Counseling, African-Americans make up only 13 percent of post-secondary students in the U.S., while at University of Phoenix they represent 23 percent of the total student population. And, according to a recent report by the publication

Diverse Issues in Higher Education, the school graduates more underrepresented students with master’s degrees in business, health care

and education than any other university in the nation.

Such diversity brings vibrancy to the classroom, creating an environment where multiple perspectives are shared to the benefit of all. Says one student, “I like that there is diversity in the classes at University of Phoenix. I’m learning with people of all ages and various backgrounds. I’m making friends with people I would never have met otherwise and I’m learning a lot from them.”

Yet while accessibility might bring the students in, it’s the quality of the education that keeps them persevering toward graduation—at a rate at or above the national average for higher education. Says Pepicello, “In the for-profit sector, we can’t succeed without offering quality products, namely our academic programs. If our students and their employers did not value our degrees, we would go out of business.”

Relevancy is a critical factor in the quality equation. “Our goal is to provide an education experience that is relevant to the student’s work, as well as to how the student will interact in his or her community and society in general,” Pepicello says. “We have to stay current to survive.” One of the main ways to achieve that pertinence is to be innovative technologically, to find the most effective way to deliver programs that serve the nation’s needs. “We’re trying to make the university educationally relevant in the same way that the Internet is making everything relevant, such as doing banking or shopping online.” Increasingly, however, people are expecting to see a whole spectrum of services online. “That includes education,” says Pepicello. “And we want it to be just a click away for all who desire a higher degree. We want to make education as accessible as the rest of the world.”

