History of the Commission for Adult Learners
As presented by Eric White,
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The Beginnings: In 1989, I received a call from the Provost’s Office (represented by Dr. Del Sweeney) asking me to chair a Task Force to look at issues related to adult learners at Penn State. I was told there had been a few previous studies on the adult learner at Penn State, but there had been no conclusive recommendations from these reports.

At first, I hesitated to take on this task for the prime reason that I knew very little about adult learners. My experiences had been primarily with traditional-aged students. But somehow the more I expressed my hesitancy, the more I realized that I was being made an “offer that I could not refuse.”

I soon came to the realization that the Provost’s Office was very much committed to this task. In fact, they provided a great deal of the clerical support, background data collection, and all the necessary behind the scenes assistance to see that the work got done.

The Task Force was put together by the Provost’s office. It consisted of faculty and staff primarily. I do not recall the exact membership except for Brian Clark, Veterans Affairs, and Charlene Harrison, Center for Adult Learners. Brian Clark is still at the University while Charlene Harrison retired in the summer of 2008. [Aside: I have not been able to track down a copy of the report. I suspect it may be buried in some of my files, or perhaps Brian or Charlene has a copy, or a copy has landed in the University Archives.]

The Task Force members were committed to structuring a report with very specific recommendations. They did not want to produce the proverbial document that sat on a shelf collecting dust. In addition to making very specific recommendations, the report also included the offices of the University that it was felt should be charged with carrying out the recommendations of the report.

As I recall there were recommendations specifically for the University Faculty Senate, for the Admissions Office, for the Office of the University Registrar, and the Office of Student Aid.

Germaine to this recollection was the recommendation to create a Commission for Adult Learners with responsibility for this given to the Office of the President.

This recommendation was prompted by the fact that the University had formed, when John Oswald was President, a Commission for Women which had been viewed as being an exemplary model for how a particular agenda could be advanced and how advocacy for a specific group served by the University could function.
“Bad” timing: By the time the Task Force report was completed, early in 1990, both the Provost, Bill Richardson, and the President, Bryce Jordan, had left the University (Bill Richardson went on to become the President of the Johns Hopkins University and Bryce Jordan retired). However, the report did not entirely languish in the transition to President Joab Thomas and Interim Provost Charles Hosler. Somehow the report landed on the desk of Provost Hosler.

I was asked to speak with the Provost. I remember a very casual and friendly conversation. Specifically, the Provost mentioned his awareness of the challenges for adult learners in that one of his sons and his wife fell into that category.

The Provost’s response to the report was primarily positive and he said that he would be passing on the recommendations to the various agencies that the reported suggested should be instrumental in carrying out the specific recommendations. He did, however, stop short at the recommendation for a President’s Commission for Adult Learners. The reasons given were not very precise and didn’t go much beyond that at the current moment, since President Thomas was new to the University, he did not feel ready to form any additional commissions.

With that, the idea of a presidential commission seemed “dead in the water,” although many of the other recommendations of the report were indeed implemented.

Fast forward eight years: In the next eight years, the Center for Adult Learners continued to flourish and I suspect that the notion of a commission was kept alive within the hearts of those who labored so hard for adult learners at Penn State.

During spring semester 1998, the idea of a Commission for Adult Learners was resurrected by the then Vice President for Student Affairs, Bill Asbury who advanced the idea of a new Commission with some urging by other individuals in the University. Four senior University officers—William W. Asbury, Vice President for Student Affairs; John J. Cahir, Vice Provost and Dean for Undergraduate Education; John J. Romano, then Vice Provost and Dean for Enrollment Management and Administration; and James H. Ryan, Vice President for Outreach and Cooperative Extension—established the Commission for Adult Learners (CAL).

Several factors prompted the co-sponsors’ creation of the commission. They included the formation of the Commonwealth College, with its focus on serving adult Pennsylvanians; declining adult enrollment in the University at a time of growth nationwide in adult enrollment; and increased competition for the adult market from other educational providers.

The sponsor appointed twenty-four inaugural (charter) members to the commission, eight of whom came from campuses other than University Park. Eric White, Brian Clark and Charlene Harrison were among the charter members and carried forward the legacy of the working group of almost a decade earlier. Shirley S. Hendrick, the late associate dean for Continuing and Distance Education in the Smeal College of Business, served as the first
commission chair. The remaining appointees included graduate and undergraduate adult learners, faculty members, staff, and administrators. The first Commission for Adult Learners meeting was held on May 6, 1998. One of the tasks for the first Commission members was to review the recommendations of the earlier Task Force report, to take stock of its status, so to speak, and then to determine initiatives and priorities.

In their invitation to persons being asked to serve on the Commission for Adult Learners, the four co-sponsors indicated that they saw the commission as a means to:

- provide a visible university-wide body whose primary purpose is to contribute to a supportive academic climate for adult learners
- monitor the recruitment, retention, customer satisfaction, and status of adult learners
- recommend changes in policy, practice, and procedures that negatively affect adult learners
- foster coordination and information exchange regarding programs and services which attract and retain adult learners
- advocate for adult learners’ concerns by providing advice and consultation or conducting special studies where appropriate

Following the retirement of three of the original sponsors, their successors—Drs. Robert N. Pangborn, Vicky L. Triponey, and Craig D. Weidemann—continued as commission sponsors. Dr. John J. Romano, now Vice President for Commonwealth Campuses, continues as a sponsor.

The Early Years: Since its inception in 1998 until the reorganization of Penn State Outreach in 2005 the Commission received significant administrative support from the Center for Adult Learner Services, a unit of the Division of Student Affairs. In addition, its Director, Dr. Charlene Harrison, was an ex-officio member of the Commission. The Commission benefited substantially from knowledge of Center staff about the needs of prospective and enrolled adult learners.

In addition to the annual reports that the Commission wrote during this period, summaries of research projects co-sponsored by the Commission and the Center and position papers were developed to help the Penn State community better identify adult learners and understand their needs. The Commission Position Paper “Status of the Undergraduate Adult Learner at Penn State” (December 2004) included numerous recommendations that guided the University’s reorganization of 2005 and placed the tasks associated with advocacy on behalf of adult learners in Outreach. Dr. Craig Weidemann, Vice President for Outreach, was named the Penn State University’s “chief advocate” for adult learners.

As the reorganization of 2005 progressed it became apparent that further changes within Outreach were needed to better serve adult learners. In September 2006, Dr. Weidemann named Ms. Martha Jordan as the Director for Adult Learner Advocacy in Penn State Outreach; the Center for Adult Learner Services was assigned to this unit. In summer
2007 a further reorganization of this unit resulted in the creation of the Office of Adult Learner Advocacy and Enrollment Services. As one of her responsibilities Ms. Jordan serves as liaison to, and ex officio member of, the Commission, and ensures that administrative support services are provided to the Commission.

**Today:** One goal of the 2007 organizational change, as identified by the sponsors, is to provide greater depth of staff support to the Commission for its work on initiatives. Because members of the Commission have demanding full-time jobs, it is anticipated that this expanded staff support will allow the members to shift the focus of their Commission work so they can spend more time identifying and defining the needs of adult learners. Due to their daily work with adult learner activities, appropriate staff in Outreach would handle more of the detail work which previously consumed much committee time.

The issues addressed by the Commission have changed over time. The choice of topics studied has been guided by presentations at Commission meetings, the committees of the Commission, the individual observations of commissioners and sponsors, and, in the past, by research analysis conducted by commissioners and staff in the Center for Adult Learner Services, among other sources. As the issues studied have changed, so have the foci of the committees on which the Commission members have served.

**COMMISSION FOR ADULT LEARNERS: CHAIRS**

1998-99    Dr. Shirley S. Hendrick, Associate Dean for Continuing and Distance Education, Smeal College of Business

1999-00    Dr. Claudia A. Limbert, Campus Executive Officer, Penn State DuBois

2000-01    Mr. Richard K. Shaffer, Director of Enrollment, Penn State Altoona

2001-02    Dr. Donna S. Queaney, Retired Associate Professor of Adult Education, College of Education

2002-03    Mr. Karl L. Martz, Director of Career Services, Penn State Harrisburg

2003-04    Dr. Mary-Beth Krogh-Jespersen, Campus Executive Officer, Penn State Worthington Scranton

2004-05    Ms. Debora L. Cheney, Foster Communications Librarian and Head of The News and Microforms Library

2005-06    Dr. Eric White, Executive Director, Division of Undergraduate Studies, and Associate Dean for Advising

2006-07    Dr. Anita McDonald, Chancellor, Penn State DuBois
2007-08  Dr. Sandra E. Gleason, Associate Dean for Faculty and Research, Office of the Vice President for Commonwealth Campuses

2008-09  Dr. Sharon E. Christ, Director of Student & Enrollment Services, Penn State York

2009-10  Dr. Keith Hillkirk, Chancellor, Penn State Schuylkill

2010-11  Dr. Ann Williams, Chancellor, Penn State Lehigh Valley

2011-12  Ms. Anna M. Griswold, Assistant Vice President for Undergraduate Education and Executive Director of Student Aid, Penn State University Park

2012-13  Dr. Gary M. Lawler, Chancellor, Penn State Hazleton