

EDITORIAL ADVISORY BOARD: Education from infancy to longevity

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A 21st century comprehensive, public university must be a place for lifelong learning. Governors State University, founded in 1969, is ahead of the game in embodying that principle.

The university has 45 years of experience as a completion university, a phrase coined by the Lumina Foundation to describe institutions of higher education with a special mission to returning adult students — those who took some college courses but never completed a degree. GSU is committed to continuing and expanding that mission. We hope one day soon we will award degrees to students who have celebrated their 100th birthday.

We will continue to use every available classroom space between 4 p.m. to 10 p.m. But we are also challenging conventional wisdom on scheduling classes for returning adults.

While it is true that some like to be on campus once a week for three-hour late-afternoon and evening blocks, many adults, particularly those with school-age children, prefer taking classes during daytime hours.

GSU is now a true 24/7 campus, offering classes every day of the week, virtually around the clock. We have found the choice of daytime or evening classes has resulted in increased enrollment and in students accelerating their studies by signing up for more courses.

We have also developed highly interactive online courses, permitting busy adults to control their academic schedules. Most of this digital instruction is hybrid, meaning opportunities for face-to-face meetings are built in so students get to know each other in person, enriching interpersonal Internet relationships.

Even as GSU expands its dual degree program in partnership with 17 community colleges, admits our first freshman class, opens our first student residence, selects a mascot (Go Jaguars!), and develops a competitive athletic program, we are at the same time strengthening our role as “the catcher in the rye,” making sure returning adults get back on track toward university graduation.

In fact, our curriculum planning for first-year students has benefited directly from our experience with returning students. GSU faculty and administrative planners began by asking why students didn't finish in the first place. We discovered many students interrupt their studies for financial reasons — not a big surprise. To address that issue at the front end, GSU maintains its place as the university with the lowest tuition and fees in Illinois. We work hard on advising students on how to graduate without debt.

Our research illuminated another reason students drop out — insufficient advising and lack of direction. One of our dual degree program students told us that until she discovered the DDP, she was “on a long, winding road without a GPS.” The answer: make sure students have a structured program and excellent advising.

Our investigations reaffirmed the importance of a sense of belonging and affiliation. We have designed a core freshman program, guaranteed to connect students with each other and with the full-time faculty members teaching their courses.

We expect to keep freshman and transfer students on track to graduation, while at the same time improving the education of adults returning to school.

GSU is proud of our service to students in every decade of life, including not just the first decade but the first year. Our Family Development Center provides state-of-the-art education to infants, toddlers and pre-school children. We hope to lead the way for other public universities to be a place for learning, from infancy to longevity.