


## *Best Practices in Assessing Adult Learners*

Presentation to the Virginia Assessment Group  
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## *Overview*

- **Averett Environment**
- **Adult Learners**
- **Adult Assessment**
  - Learning Process
  - Learning Products
- **Challenges and Implications**
  - Program and Course Effectiveness
  - Faculty Development
- **Conclusions**

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## *Averett Environment*

- **Limited entrance requirements**
  - "open" enrollment
  - No GMAT/SAT
  - GPA 3.0
  - Work requirement
- **Locations – 20+ teaching sites**
- **Student load – 1300**
  - Primarily BBA and MBA
  - Limited MEd and BS Aerospace Management
- **Adjunct faculty – deliver 75% of courses**

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## Program Model

- Cohort based – 15+ students
- Required Study Teams – 3-5 students
- “Lock-step”
  - Sequential courses
  - Common curriculum – “module” system
- 6-10 week course duration
  - One night per week with faculty (4 hours)
  - Weekly Study Team collaboration (approximately 4 hours)

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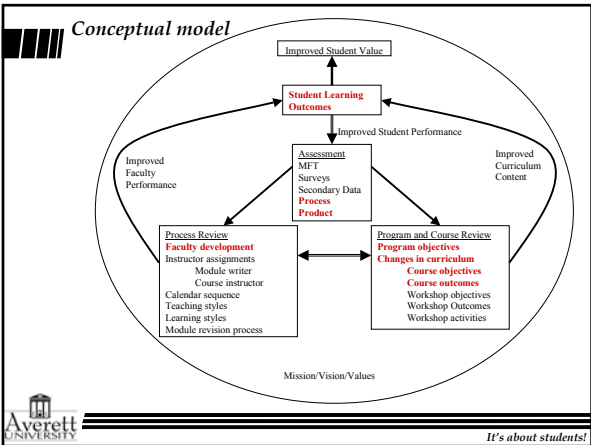
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## Why look at adult learners

- Adults are different
  - Nature of experiences
  - Expectations for faculty and grading
- Unique implications for improving
  - Learning Process
  - Learning Product

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**//// Nature of Adult Learners**

- Adults have prior understanding from life experience – at least conceptual
- Adults often “subject matter experts”
- Adults are goal and application-oriented
  - Material must be “relevant”
  - Performance oriented
- Adults are stakeholders in learning process
- Adults need to be shown respect
- Faculty challenge is often to teach value of understanding theory

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**//// Interaction with Adult Learners**

- Adults are often highly critical of instructors and curriculum
  - “What’s so special about this ‘guy’?”
  - “Why do I need to take this?”
- Adults have high expectations for faculty
  - Many professional trainers
  - Almost all have training experience
- Adults “know good instruction”
  - Preparation
  - Content

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**//// Grading Adult Learners**

- Adults have high ego involvement
- Adults have great pressure to excel
  - Goal-oriented expectations
  - Investment of time and money
  - Employer reimbursement ramifications
  - Family pressure
- Adults need to have clear standard or expectation of performance

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**//// Assessment of Learning Process**

- Course and instructor level “practices”
  - Pre-course Dialog
  - In-process Reviews
  - After-action review
  - Study Team assessments
- Program level “practices”
  - Faculty end of course evaluations
  - Student end of course evaluations
- Use language of business when possible

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**//// Pre-course Dialog  
(Course Orientation)**

- “Sets the stage”
  - Identification of student expectations
  - Identification of student prior experience
- First contact with students by instructor
- Establishes early discussion
- Often facilitated through Blackboard

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**//// In-process Reviews (Status Check)**

- “Check on learning”
- Conducted during conduct of course
- Identifies things
  - Going well
  - Not going well
  - Method to improve
- Related to
  - Content
  - Process
  - Application of knowledge
- Conducted either as
  - Affinity Diagram
  - Facilitated Discussion (focus group)

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**////** *After-action Review*

- Review of what should have occurred and what actually did occur
- Link to course objectives and outcomes
- Issues of concern
  - Areas to sustain
  - Areas to improve
  - Methods to improve
- Conducted either as
  - Facilitated discussion
  - On-line discussion

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**////** *Study Team Evaluations*

- Process review
  - Team assignments
  - Team activities
  - Identification of match between team and faculty expectations
  - Conducted as team assessment
- Individual performance
  - Assessment of contribution of team members
  - Conducted as individual assessment
  - Implications for student grade

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**////** *Faculty End-of-Course Evaluation*

- Conducted with each course
- Evaluates faculty perspective of
  - Curriculum content
    - Objectives and outcomes
    - Textbook
    - Assignments and activities
  - Faculty conduct of course
  - Readiness of students
- Self-reflection for faculty improvement – “how will you improve next time...”
- Data collection at program level
- Feedback to module writer and faculty development

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**//// Student End-of-Course Evaluation**

- Conducted with each course
- Evaluates student perspective of
  - Curriculum content
  - Faculty performance
  - Support systems
- Data collection at program level
- Feedback to individual instructor and program directors

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**//// Assessment of Learning Products**

- Products differ by
  - Discipline
  - Purpose – Summative or Formative
- Practices include use of
  - Exams
  - Essay/writing assignments
  - Presentations
  - Case Study Analysis
  - Projects – Intermediate and Capstone

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**//// Examinations**

- Limited application
- Difficulties for adults
  - Test anxiety
  - Retention of detailed information
  - Varying writing skills
- True/false, multiple choice – typically lower level learning
- Essay – can reflect higher level learning
- Can be effective for individual assignments

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**////** *Essay/Writing Assignments*

- Common requirement for most courses
- Effective if linked to course outcomes
- Communication skills linked to program objectives/ outcomes
  - Written communication
  - Critical Thinking
- Very effective for individual assignments
- Less value for team assignments
- Assessed through
  - Program level rubrics
  - Tailored grading

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**////** *Presentation Skills*

- Evaluated in nearly all courses
- Effective if assignment linked to course outcome
- Linked to program objectives/outcome
- Effective for individual and team assignments
- Assessed through
  - Tailored grading for assignment
  - Rubric for presentation skills

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**////** *Case Study Analysis*

- Most common technique
  - May include
    - Written analysis
    - Presentation of findings
  - Effective for individual and team assignments
  - Can demonstrate multiple levels of learning
  - Very effective if linked to questions requiring transfer of learning
- Assessed through
  - Assignment specific grading
  - Tailored rubrics

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## Projects

- Can be either
  - Specific to course
  - Program level – “capstone”
- May include
  - Written analysis
  - Presentation of findings/activity
- Effective for individual or team – depending on assignment
- Can demonstrate multiple levels of learning
- Assessed through
  - Specific grade requirements
  - Tailored rubric
  - Program level rubrics (capstone assignments)



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## Assessment Example

- 10-week graduate Business Research course

Week	Process	Product	
pre-	Pre-course survey		
1		Case Study	Presentation
		Project definition	Essay
2		Case Study	Presentation
		Literature review	Essay
3		Case Study	Presentation
		Literature review	Essay
4	IPR-focus group	Case Study	Presentation
		Literature review	Essay
5		Project-Research Proposal	Paper & Presentation
6		Project-Questionnaire revision	Paper & Presentation
7	IPR-affinity diagram		
8			
9			
10	AAR	Project-Research Report	Presentation
	Study Team Eval	Examination	
post-	Student EOC		
	Faculty EOC		



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## Program Effectiveness Challenges

- Faculty understanding of adult learning concepts and their implications
- Differing perspectives of faculty
  - Academic vs. practitioner
  - Full-time vs. adjunct
  - Traditional vs. non-traditional
- Education of faculty on processes
- Faculty agreement on interpretation of assessment results
- Faculty adoption and implementation of changes



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**////** *Course Level Challenges*

- Faculty understanding of adult learning concepts and their implications
- Faculty understanding of sequence and role of courses
- Faculty comfort level with material
- Faculty compliance with processes
  - Use of course modules
  - Faculty self-assessment
  - Modifications based on course experience

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**////** *Methods for Improvement*

- Share ideas and techniques
  - Presentations for faculty
  - Use of Blackboard by faculty
    - Discussion boards
    - Content areas
- Incorporate review of assessment techniques in curriculum review
  - Program links
  - Course content and design – use of course review rubric
- Place emphasis on faculty development

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**////** *Faculty Development Issues*

- Must ensure faculty understand
  - Adult learning concepts
  - Differences – adult and traditional students
  - Assessment and feedback systems
  - Program/course/workshop/activity links
  - Appropriate types of
    - Assignments
    - Activities
- Critical nature of program design and role of curriculum writers

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**////** *Faculty Development (cont)*

- Recognize background of faculty
  - Career academics
    - Must ensure have understanding of practical application
    - Adults are application oriented – demand and expect experienced faculty
  - Practitioners
    - Must ensure have understanding of theory
    - Academics expect appropriate focus on theory in classroom
- Faculty development challenge to bridge “gap”



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**////** *Conclusion*

- Nature of adult learners
  - Growing portion of student population
  - Important to understand unique perspective
  - Must use appropriate assessment techniques
- Significant implications for program and course design
- Essential nature of faculty development



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*Questions?*

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