Provost Jones Remarks
Hendrick Best Practices for Adult Learners Conference
Wednesday, May 9, 2018

Penn State Executive Vice President and Provost Nick Jones welcomed attendees to the annual Hendrick Best Practices for Adult Learners Conference. Following is a transcript of his opening remarks from the event at the Nittany Lion Inn on the University Park campus.

Good morning everyone. I’d like to thank Jamie Campbell and members of the Commission for Adult Learners for inviting me to say a few words today.

And, thank you all for being here.

The Hendrick Best Practices for Adult Learners Conference is as vital as ever. But, this year’s event also has special meaning, as the Commission celebrates 20 years of exceptional work and service.

Since its inception in 1998, the Commission has been the key support and advocacy group for adult learners at Penn State, giving them a strong collective voice on our campuses while identifying ways to ensure our University remains an open and welcoming place for them.

On behalf of the University, I congratulate the Commission and offer a robust “Thank You” to everyone who is dedicated to improving the adult-learner experience at Penn State.

The focus of this conference — the ever-growing importance of adult learning, and best practices for how Penn State can support these students’ success — resonates quite strongly with me.
My educational path was fairly typical – from high school to college to graduate study … and then into the workforce.

My partner, however, traveled a different road. She began taking college courses, then stepped away for a bit, and later – as a working adult – completed her degree program.

Her college embraced her passion for learning and desire to achieve a degree later in life.

If she was looking to pursue a college degree now, I’m sure Penn State would be a fine choice. We’ve become an institution of higher learning well equipped to serve students of all ages.

And it’s not only about accommodating them or tailoring certain offerings to meet their needs. Instead, it’s about engaging them in meaningful ways that exceed their expectations and enable them to achieve things they may not have considered possible.

At Penn State, we define an “adult learner” as an individual who typically is 24 years of age or older.

The student may have multiple adult roles – such as a parent, a spouse or partner, or an employee. He or she may be returning to school after four or more years of employment, raising a family, or other activity.

Increasingly, adult learners may be veterans of the armed services or actively serving.
In the United States, about 80 million people ages 24 to 65 graduated from high school but have not earned a college degree. Another 15 million people in that age range have an associate's degree but not a bachelor's.

So, it makes sense that, as the demand for a more skilled and credentialed workforce continues to build, more individuals than ever before are pursuing higher education at different stages of their lives.

Adult learners make up about a third of all college students in the United States, and roughly 27 percent of undergraduate students.

At Penn State, nearly 18,000 of our undergraduate students are adult learners, representing about 20 percent of Penn State’s total undergraduate headcount. About half of these learners are Penn State World Campus students, with the other half pursuing their studies here in University Park or at one of our Commonwealth Campuses statewide.

The Commonwealth Campuses definitely appeal to many of our adult learners. For example, at our DuBois, Harrisburg, and New Kensington campuses, roughly one of every four enrolled undergraduates is an adult.

At Abington and Mont Alto that number is closer to one of every three. At Penn State Shenango, it's about one of two.
Regardless of campus, one thing is certain: These students hoping to advance their careers, increase their earning potential, or simply to better themselves through lifelong learning deserve the high-quality education that Penn State offers.

And we want adult students' learning experiences at Penn State to be superlative.

So, how do we accomplish that?

It starts with our University-wide strategic plan and related initiatives. From Transforming Education to Driving Digital Innovation, the plan’s thematic priorities all take adult learners’ needs into consideration in some way.

And, as we carry out our overarching mission of teaching, research, and service, serving adult learners remains an area of significant focus.

Adult learners often have concerns and questions that differ from those of so-called “traditional” students. Among them are:

• “Can I afford it?”
• “Can I make it work in my busy life?”
• “Can I take classes on campus, online, or both?”

And here is a major one:

• “By going back to school, will it help me to achieve what I want to achieve?”

Through various means, Penn State is working to address these and other vital concerns.
Penn State’s core mission as a land-grant institution is to keep education accessible and affordable, while ensuring varied pathways of success for our students.

So, we offer financial guidance, mentors, and peer support, and places and opportunities to meet and ask questions.

We also tackle other critical issues for adult learners, such as prior learning assessment, transfer of credits from other institutions, child care, flexible scheduling, and military and veteran support services.

Many people, working groups, and committees are focused on these areas. For example, among its many accomplishments in recent years, the Commission established the Adult Learner Engagement Committee.

While Penn State offers activities to engage adult learners, that population still can feel disconnected.

So, the committee has been investigating best practices and proposing effective ways to help adult learners feel a true sense of belonging across the University. We focus a lot on diversity and inclusion at Penn State, and adult learners are integral to those efforts.

Meanwhile, the Commission’s Access and Affordability Task Force is continuing to dig into several key topics, including potential new tuition models for adult learners and enhanced scholarship assistance to help them complete their degree programs.
The task force is also exploring how factors such as time to graduation, getting credit for prior learning, lack of academic preparation, and lack of financial literacy can be barriers to adult learners, and how we can help mitigate those challenges.

Meanwhile, the Commission’s Military and Veteran Support Services Committee continues to assist Penn State students who are active duty or veterans.

Among recent developments, the University Faculty Senate approved a short-term military absence policy. Last week, we also held honor cords ceremonies for military graduates of our World Campus and at University Park, Altoona, and Dubois.

Serving our adult students adeptly is not only important to the University, but also to the Commonwealth.

With two-thirds of our undergraduate adult learners residing right here in Pennsylvania, we know that what they learn at Penn State will drive their personal and professional success, often to Pennsylvania’s benefit.

As you focus today on new ideas for engaging and retaining adult learners at Penn State, remember that as we support them in their educational endeavors, they in turn will have profound impacts on us and countless others.

Your ideas and efforts will drive their future success … and ours.

Thank you for being here today and for all you do. Enjoy today’s conference.