Funding policies limit plus-50 programs

BY MATTHEW DEMICKI

State funding policies for community colleges are limiting many two-year colleges from implementing programs for students over the age of 50, according to a new survey from the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC).

Fifty-four percent of the 204 community colleges participating in the survey by AACC’s Plus 50 Initiative said state full-time equivalent (FTE) formulas affect their ability to spend state funding on programs for plus-50 learners.

Funding policies are complex and vary, but essentially funding for community colleges among states is based on the number of FTE students. In general, the more FTE students, the more state funding the college receives.

However, it’s common that only credit hours count toward FTE computations, the accompanying report said, and credit hours tend to be less attractive to older learners.

“It’s really a disincentive to serve this population,” Mary Sue Vickers, director of the Plus 50 Initiative, said of the FTE formula.

About half of surveyed colleges also reported that state funding is unavailable for refresher courses for plus-50 students going back to college. The report noted that among states that did make funds available, almost two-thirds of community colleges offered refresher computer courses specifically for older learners.

About 40 percent of colleges said funding tied to performance measures is another barrier to state funds. One of the primary goals of community colleges is to support students in the transition to a four-year college, and performance measures in this area are community college graduation rates and time-to-degree, the report said. The measures are appropriate for students in their 20s and 30s, but not for older students, it said.

“Plus 50 students attend community college to take selected courses that help them achieve specific goals,” the report said. “The vast majority of these students are not interested in obtaining a degree.”

Performance measures in some situations can penalize colleges that attract plus-50 learners because these students lower the graduation rate and time-to-degree statistics, the report said.

With the volume of recent layoffs across the country, many older learners are looking into tuition waivers provided at some community colleges. But 65 percent of surveyed colleges said that providing such waivers for the over 50 population presents a challenge. State policies for tuition waivers leave many adults in the lurch and without financial aid, the report said. The waivers are often not available for adults under age 60 and usually are provided only to full-time students. They may only be used with for-credit courses or to cover courses that are under-enrolled. Older learners frequently attend part-time and may be drawn to non-credit courses.

“The policies in many states pose a conundrum for community colleges that are seeking to help a baby boomer population that wants short-term workforce training and career development programs,” said AACC President George Boggs.

Such barriers are important to address as more community colleges offer programs specifically for plus 50 learners. Eighty-four percent of community colleges participating in the survey reported that their institutions offer programs for students over 50. Ninety-three percent of these colleges see a demand for such programming—mostly from people age 50 and older but also from business and community organizations.

With plunging retirement accounts forcing older workers to hold off retirement, baby boomers are increasingly turning to two-year colleges to brush up on their job skills. Fifty-eight percent of the colleges with plus 50 programs reported that they offer workforce training and career development for that age group. These include programs like resume tune-ups, job interviewing boosters, computer refresher courses and certificate programs for training in new careers.

Forty-five percent of the colleges with workforce training and
career development programs said they reach out to local employers to communicate the value of plus 50 employees.

Targeted marketing is becoming increasingly important for plus-50 programs, the report said. Forty-three percent of colleges are using marketing plans to let older adults know about the educational opportunities available to them at community colleges. About one-quarter of the institutions said that within the last five years they had conducted a needs assessment of area residents age 50 and older to help craft their program development.

Needs assessment is critical to the success of such programs, Vickers said. “Colleges have to know who they are serving, what they want and what they need,” she said. “If they don’t know that about the audience, they cannot market to them.”