Establishing and Nurturing an Adult Learning Ecosystem at Tiffin University

Dan Clark, Tiffin University
Mady Iannantuono, Tiffin University
Cassie Paas, Tiffin University

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Abstract

Over the past several years, Tiffin University has engaged in purposeful transformation of its structures, policies, and practices to establish and nurture an expansive ecosystem that better serves the specific and evolving needs of its non-traditional, adult, and transfer students. This paper explores the strategies, accomplishments, and lessons learned during this ongoing, multi-phase effort to *Challenge Conventional Wisdom* and position TU as a preferred destination for students of all types.

Context

Tiffin University (TU) is a small private university located in Tiffin, Ohio, a micropolitan area of 18,000 people, roughly equidistant from Columbus, Detroit, and Cleveland. Over the past decade, TU has experienced fluctuating and troubling enrollment trends, with a peak of nearly 5,000 students in 2013 followed by significant and consistent declines from 2014 to 2020. Under the leadership of President Lillian Schumacher, TU has embraced a focus on adult, distance, and graduate learning as "an integral component to TU's growth strategy." This approach emphasizes the intentional investment in and expansion of the university's service to that enrollment sector to sustain the institution's ability to provide an access point to higher education for the region and beyond.

Introduction

In response to a specific directive in the University's 2017-2022 Strategic Plan, TU's Center for Online and Extended Learning was reorganized in 2018 and a new Vice Provost was hired, marking the start of a concerted effort to better serve non-traditional, adult, and transfer students. This transformation focused on two broad categories: *pathways to degree* and *the student experience*. Key initiatives related to improving pathways to degree included revamping the general education program, creating flexible and modular curriculum models, and streamlining transfer pathways. The student experience has been enhanced by improving the consistency, navigability, and accessibility of online courses, developing comprehensive student support services, fostering faculty engagement with their students, integrating generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) into the curriculum, and continuously evaluating and optimizing learning resources to ensure the best outcomes for students. Outlined in greater detail below, these initiatives, among others, have begun to pay dividends. TU's recent downward trend in enrollment has been reversed, resulting in double-digit growth in online programs, while the retention rate of these students has eclipsed 90%.

Focus One: Pathways to Degree

Streamlining the Curriculum

Like much of higher education, TU's curriculum in 2017 had become fairly dated, was saddled with obsolete and bureaucratic barriers to success, and was long overdue for reform. In an effort to improve the "value proposition" of a TU degree to students, who now had more flexible options in an increasingly competitive higher ed landscape, the university underwent a multi-phase process of streamlining the curriculum and reducing financial and other burdens on students, distinguishing it from other educational options.

General Education Reform

It was clear that TU's traditional, bloated Gen-Ed curriculum was not only no longer reflective of the university's mission to *educate students by linking knowledge to professional practice*, but it had also become unwieldy and expensive to deliver and served to limit curricular flexibility and student choice. Although TU's faculty had approved a new set of Institutional Standards for Core Competencies, the existing curriculum was not aligned with these standards. Over an 18-month process, an interdisciplinary team of stakeholders refined the newly-dubbed **Tiffin Core** into a vibrant, four-year foundational experience that prepares students with essential skills in writing, speaking, comprehension, logical thinking, and critical analysis. Its Student Learning Outcomes are tied to measurable, mission-linked goals that better meet the professional needs of 21st-century graduates. In addition to providing a more relevant and meaningful experience, the 25% reduction in credits as a result of this redesign also facilitated curricular flexibility and served as a launching point for subsequent efforts.

Instituting a Modular Curriculum Framework

Perhaps no initiative had a greater impact on curricular reform than the **Modular Curriculum** model. Guided by principles such as interdisciplinary learning, agility, facilitating student success, and genuine transfer friendliness, the model allocates credits in such a way that all majors function as de-facto 2+2 programs. It recognizes diverse

forms of learning and credentials, emphasizes creating pathways rather than barriers, and makes programs more desirable and sustainable. It benefits first-time, full-time freshmen without putting transfer students at a disadvantage, empowering them to choose from a variety of majors, pursue minors or second majors, obtain career-related certificates, or change career goals, all while strengthening the university's fiscal sustainability.

The flexibility inherent in the Modular Curriculum model also served to spark interdisciplinary collaboration and led directly to other curricular innovation such as the **Dual-Enrollment Program** where undergraduate students who meet certain academic criteria can enroll in graduate courses that will count toward both undergraduate and graduate degrees. This fully accredited process facilitates the attainment of higher-order knowledge and skills, allowing graduates to stand out in a competitive job market while also accelerating the completion of their graduate programs, saving time and money. Additionally, to help students become more marketable, **Professional Skills Tracks** were developed. These tracks consist of purposefully clustered elective coursework across various study areas, such as Digital Communication, Social Justice and Advocacy, and Financial Literacy, designed to equip students with key concepts and skills that provide a competitive edge. These tracks offer meaningful focus to students' open elective coursework, helping them to hone essential professional skills, and enhancing the overall value of their education.

Building Transfer Pathways
With the modular curriculum in place, most TU programs now offer associate degree holders the opportunity to complete their bachelor's degree in no more than 60 additional credits, regardless of their degree path. In cases where a transfer student has completed an associate degree that aligns with the topic area of the bachelor's degree being pursued, the coursework completed for the associate degree is recognized as fulfilling the entirety of lower-division (100-200 level) coursework requirements in the bachelor's program. This continuity simplifies the academic pathway for students, allowing them to augment their previous education with higher-level coursework required for their bachelor's degree. It also has led to the innovative **DragonNext** program, a premier partnership between TU and a growing list of regional community colleges that provides a seamless transition for graduates of these institutions into TU's bachelor's degree programs. The tuition discount offered as part of DragonNext renders a bachelor's degree more attainable and affordable for students as well. Given that these programs incentivize students to complete their degrees at the partner universities, the partners benefit from increased graduation rates. Additionally, TU explored the creation of **Preferred Partnership** agreements to establish attractive tuition discounts and transfer options for students of out-of-market institutions to create additional enrollment into its online programs.

Transfer-Supporting Curriculum
To meet the evolving demands of the modern workforce, several programs, such as the **Workplace Leadership** (degree completion) and **Contemporary Justice** (transfer-focused) online bachelor's programs were created to serve the needs of students who have earned significant credit but have not attained a degree.

Similarly, a transfer-student-focused pathway through the two-course, upper-division portion of the Tiffin Core general education curriculum was created to support adult learners who were returning to college and ensured relevance while fulfilling the program outcomes and intents. Finally, the **Completed General Education Petition** process allows TU to consider a transfer student's general education requirements as fulfilled if they have

finished the requisite coursework at their previous institution. By recognizing the student's General Education experience as a foundational "unit," this approach renders course-by-course analysis unnecessary while upholding academic standards.

Credit for Prior Learning

In collaboration with the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL), TU revamped its approach to Credit for Prior Learning (CPL), resulting in a new structure and updated process. This opportunity has proven to be extremely popular with current and prospective students, with more than 1400 hours' worth of credit for professional certifications, military experience, credit-by-exam, and work experience awarded since the program's inception in late 2022.

With the creation of the **WorkforceReady** program, TU began offering professional certifications built to meet industry needs for upskilling in areas that range from technology, advanced manufacturing, healthcare, and human resources. Concurrently, TU approved an **Associate of Applied Science in Professional Skills** to provide an "onramp" for students to combine their earned professional certifications with a modified Tiffin Core and achieve an academic credential, ideally en route to a bachelor's degree or beyond.

Eliminating Procedural and Policy Barriers

Efforts to improve the value proposition to potential students included a reconsideration of systems and structures that served as unintended barriers to enrollment, progress, and completion. After a thorough audit of practices and policies informed by interviews with stakeholders, several examples were discovered that no longer served their original intent or the best interest of the students. The team carefully challenged underlying fallacies, sought alternative solutions, and were ultimately able to eliminate or mitigate nearly a dozen of these unintended barriers such as hidden prerequisites, the 121st credit, the 10-year English rule, and the 48-credit requirement. Correcting these policies has reduced administrative overhead, and more importantly, enabled the creation of innovative transfer approaches (like A2B), resulting in a significant increase in transfer and degree completion students.

Conclusion

The comprehensive streamlining of TU's curriculum has fundamentally reshaped the institution's academic landscape. By reimagining the general education, implementing a flexible modular curriculum, and creating efficient transfer pathways, TU has become more appealing and accessible to many prospective students. Innovations like dual-enrollment programs and professional skills tracks provide students with applicable skills and accelerated pathways to earning higher degrees. Additionally, granting credit for prior learning and eliminating outdated, arbitrary barriers have further boosted enrollment and retention numbers, and confirmed TU's commitment to providing flexible, attainable, and relevant academic programs.

Focus Two: The Student Experience

As outlined above, curricular innovations were largely focused on obtaining potential non-traditional, adult, and transfer students by improving the "value proposition" of a TU degree. Additional efforts concentrated on the creation of a welcoming and helpful learning environment to retain them, maintain their educational momentum and support them along their journey to a degree (or degrees).

NextGen Online Course Design
Since the predominance of adult and non-traditional learners access their education via the online curriculum, TU placed a priority on the creation of a learning environment to best serve their needs. For example, the rollout of the **NextGen4** course design at TU marked the culmination of a multi-year effort to elevate the learning experience and academic performance of our online students. The framework enhances the consistency, navigability, and accessibility of weekly modules and associated resources, incorporates extended instructional narratives to provide guidance through each module, and aligns course content and activities with weekly learning goals. Additionally, meta-instructional elements were integrated to support successful completion of course activities, while inauthentic metrics of rigor were eliminated.

Launched this year, **NextGen5** builds upon the success of its predecessor by enhancing course quality through improved instructor interaction and engagement. Framed around three guiding principles, it augments NextGen4's strengths, addresses diverse student needs, improves instructor engagement, and aims to optimize the online learning experience for both students seeking efficient course completion and those who prioritize engaging with faculty and challenging, relevant assignments.

The NextGen5 design also marks the advent of fully integrating **GenAI** into the curriculum, facilitating the development of activities that enhance metacognitive learning and actively engage students in assessments that model the real-world. In addition, the ethical use of GenAI is promoted and supported through assignments with specific instructions and suggestions for incorporating it.

Further, the incorporation of GenAI into the course development process has shifted more of the workload to our learning design team, promoting the inclusion of a greater diversity of instructional methods, materials, and resources. This technological advancement facilitates the creation of more engaging learning activities, makes course building more efficient, and has redefined the roles of Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) and learning designers. By reassigning the responsibility for narrative creation from SMEs to learning designers, SMEs can now focus on providing more useful feedback and input related to their areas of expertise.

Finally, TU continues its efforts to support students through refinement of its approach to textbooks and other instructional resources. With the aim of providing students with the best learning materials and reducing overall costs, TU has enhanced electronic textbook delivery through the **DragonACCESS** program and is exploring the incorporation of more open educational resources.

Student Support Structures

As TU's population of adult learners returning to school has grown, so too has the implementation of educational support structures tailored to meet the needs of this specific learner type and to promote their academic success.

Since many returning learners have not taken academic math or rhetoric courses in some time, **Embedded Tutors** have been added to select online courses to provide individual consultations and group review sessions to aid students in completing their coursework. These tutors employ various collaboration technologies to answer questions regarding content and assignments and accommodate individual student needs.

Piloted in 2023, the **Ombuds** program at TU provides a confidential, impartial resource for students to seek support and address concerns. The program offers assistance with a wide range of issues, including technical help, course and assignment guidance, career advice, and financial aid information. Available through the *Ask Me Anything* initiative, students can contact the on-call, AI-supported ombudsman to receive help during extended service hours. By resolving problems and offering reliable guidance efficiently, the program aims to maintain student momentum and enhance their overall learning experience.

The centralized **Faculty Services** unit supports a positive experience for students by hiring, training, and onboarding qualified online instructors and actively monitoring their engagement in courses to ensure requisite participation and responsiveness. In collaboration with the Center for Faculty Support and Innovative Teaching, a triangulated approach is employed that analyzes quantitative data from Learning Management System log files, qualitative input from student feedback, questions, and complaints, and summative data obtained from end-of-term student surveys to ensure continuous improvement in the quality of online instruction. Instructors who fail to meet expectations are provided with additional training. If performance does not improve, they are not retained.

In addition to its course design refinements, the **NextGen5** initiative also incorporates more prescriptive faculty engagement requirements intended to effectively serve the diverse expectations of students, while optimizing faculty efforts to ensure impact and best serve their disparate needs. To support its rollout, faculty support and training has been augmented to mitigate the number of minimally engaged faculty and enhance the teaching capabilities of those dedicated to fostering student success.

Finally, a dedicated team of professional staff engage in what might most accurately be characterized as **intrusive advising** to support a positive and productive experience for students as they pursue their chosen degree or credential. Instead of requiring interaction with multiple discipline-specific advisors, this approach provides a single adviser who serves as a friendly, trusted advocate to support students throughout their degree program from start to finish. The advising process begins before a student officially enrolls, paving the way for conversations around course rotations and degree plans, as well as directing them to needed campus resources, resulting in students feeling supported and a fully-welcome part of the campus community.

In supporting students, advisors utilize various technologies to ensure momentum and progress toward a degree. For example, advisors receive a daily automated activity report, generated from the learning

management system database, that provides quantitative student participation data, informing outreach or intervention if a student has begun to fall behind in their work. In cases of concern, the **Dragon360** notification tool is utilized to provide confidential alerts to the relevant support infrastructure (Instructors, Advisor, Student Affairs staff, etc.) to activate support interventions as appropriate.

Lastly, the virtual **Student Orientation** is a constantly-evolving effort to welcome students to the university and equip them with essential knowledge regarding procedures and policies, support resources, and success strategies to help them thrive. Developed and facilitated by the advising team, the orientation not only provides a meaningful onboarding experience and information repository, but it has also recently been expanded to include optional moderated learning communities that students can participate in for peer-to-peer support throughout their time at TU.

Conclusion

Though online and flexible learning environments provide expanded access to education, students in these contexts often struggle to build community. It can be a challenge for students, especially adult learners and those who are returning to school after some time away, to maintain momentum in this new learning context. To address this, TU offers courses designed to cultivate relationships between students and their instructors, supported by various resources outside of the classroom to ensure students enjoy a successful educational experience, and ultimately, achieve their academic and professional goals.

Making the Sausage

TU's 2017-2022 Strategic Plan outlined specific strategies and expectations to expand areas of Adult, Distance and Graduate Learning; however, initial efforts, based largely around the concept of a *Cross-Functional Matrix* of distributed stakeholders, failed to gain traction. This was due both to the inherent complexity of the model as well as the disparate levels of buy-in, accountability, and decision-making authority demonstrated by the area owners.

To regain stalled momentum, the University Registrar and the Vice Provost for Online and Extended Learning established the **Future Team** to anticipate and address emerging institutional imperatives. This group of forward-thinking decision makers, composed of the Provost, Vice Provost, Registrar, and one of the School Deans, met bi-weekly to identify key trends, challenges, and opportunities to proactively develop strategies to ensure the university's continued growth and success. One of the team's first major initiatives was the effort to identify and refine or eliminate practices and policies that served as unintended barriers to enrollment, progress, and completion. That effort was followed up with the completion of a comprehensive Program Prioritization project for online Graduate and Undergraduate programs.

Recommendations stemming from the **Graduate Program Prioritization** included reducing hours in the Master's of Business Administration and redesigning the Master's of Science in Criminal Justice into a "meta-major" structure and the expansion of dual-enrollment pathways for TU undergraduates. To increase efficiency of

section offerings, a "course carousel" was also created. Additionally, the Academic Technology Master's program was restructured into a Master's of Education in Instructional Design, and an innovative "12-12-12" pricing structure was implemented. The Master's of Humanities programs were updated, and partnerships with other institutions were initiated to establish streamlined 3+2 or 4+1 pathways.

The **Undergraduate Program Prioritization** indicated the need to pivot our focus to degree completers and transfer students and improve the efficiency, flexibility, and enrollment of online undergraduate offerings. This, in turn, prompted many of the efforts outlined above (e.g., creation of degree-completion programs, streamlined transfer pathways, and improving curricular relevance). Several underperforming programs were sunsetted or revised to fit this new approach. Another key lesson learned from this process is the somewhat counterintuitive realization that *not all enrollments are a net positive*. While the Enrollment Management team works diligently to capture every possible student, it is the *distribution* of these enrollments that is crucial to the overall health of the university. Trickling enrollment levels in unpopular programs can add to the burden of low-enrollment sections and scheduling complexity that may actually be deleterious to sustainability.

In response, the **Pathways Team** was created to bridge the information and operational disconnect between the Academic and Enrollment Management groups and better align their efforts. This interdepartmental "action team," composed of staff from the Registrar's office, Center for Online and Extended Learning, and Online Enrollment Management, met weekly to brainstorm the creation of new and differentiating enrollment pathways, including the A2B and DragonNext projects. These innovations were designed to provide flexible and efficient routes for students to achieve their academic goals, enhancing the overall enrollment process and supporting student success.

Finally, the creation of the **School of Education and Extended Learning** (SEEL) played a pivotal role in making these innovations possible. By establishing SEEL as an academic home with a dean holding academic rank, it provided the necessary flexibility and authority to spearhead initiatives aimed at revitalizing and innovating Tiffin University's academic offerings. This structure empowered SEEL to lead interdisciplinary efforts, develop new programs, and implement strategic changes to better serve students' evolving needs in emerging fields of education and lifelong learning.

By fostering collaboration across departments and engaging in forward-thinking initiatives, these teams and projects enabled the university to not only nurture the adult learning ecosystem at TU, but to also stay ahead of the curve and remain competitive.

<u>Lessons Learned</u>

Throughout this ongoing, multi-phase process, several revelations and lessons (often hard-learned) emerged that will inform and guide ongoing efforts. First and foremost of these is to *get the right people around the table*. This work is often a heavy lift and not for the faint of heart. The composition of the action teams is key. While creativity, entrepreneurship and a student-centered perspective are all important, they alone are insufficient if those with decision-making authority are not included.

Second, it is helpful to remember to *be patient with people but aggressive in solving issues*. The pace of change in higher education is notoriously slow, but many universities (particularly small privates) are currently drawing on their endowment funds to backfill budgetary deficits. In short, the clock is ticking. However, the strength of our universities is often the strength of the people who comprise their faculty and staff. It is crucial to remember that many of the structures and processes that are ripe for change were initially implemented by good people and for what, at the time, were good reasons. For many, their very professional identities are tied up in the structures they have helped create, and it can be distressing if they feel under siege by a change process. Many may resort to a variety of rhetorical approaches to preserve their legacy; logical fallacies will abound and must be dealt with directly, but gracefully.

Similarly, many faculty perceive the university from their discipline out: their classroom, their department, their school, etc. Many will be blissfully unaware, or worse, dubious of the fiscal pressures the university faces. Deft navigation of the governance structure is important, and consistent, candid communication is paramount. Whenever possible, all stakeholders should be welcomed to the conversation and, most importantly, *encouraged to see themselves as part of the solution*. A surprising amount of latitude is often given if others are convinced that efforts are earnest, aligned with the university mission, and in the best interest of sustaining the university's ability to carry out that mission into the future.

Additionally, *the agility inherent in small private institutions can be both a blessing and a curse*. While changes are usually implemented far more rapidly, constant efforts that are seemingly uniform or non-strategic can result in frustration, fatigue, and burnout. Undue concern over "what other universities are doing" or falling into the "best practices" trap are common missteps that can cause wasted effort and constant change churn.

Finally, *it is a wasted opportunity to fail to leverage the accreditation process*. In an effort to avoid the dreaded concern or sanction from their accreditors, too many institutions engage in obfuscation to conceal the warts of their current circumstances. In so doing, they eschew a prime opportunity for consultation, guidance, and a much-needed reality check.

Navigating the change necessary in Higher Education is certainly hard work, but it is *good* work. To succeed, we must not ignore our histories, nor must we be slaves to them. The rules of the game continue to change; we must be open to change and the possibilities it brings. And when in doubt, we must do what is best for our students, because what is best for our students is usually strongly correlated to what is best for our survival.

Next Steps

The progress outlined above did not happen overnight, and it required a significant effort, open communication and collaboration, and some compromise from a variety of campus constituencies. Although these efforts are far from complete, the initial indicators are promising:

As of August 1, 2024, online enrollment levels stand at over 125% of their nadir in 2021, and projections show growth continuing along a similar trajectory. Likewise, retention numbers for online students pursuing bachelor, master, or doctoral degrees continue to hover around 90%, meaning that not only are more students attending TU, but they are also maintaining their academic momentum and ultimately graduating. Although not *all* online students are adult and transfer students, growth in the online modality serves as a good indicator of the success TU has attained in recruiting, enrolling, and retaining this population.

Even with these encouraging results, significant work remains. For example, the quality, currency, and relevance of online course shells will continue to improve as the application of a meta major structure is expanded, eliminating unnecessary duplication and thus optimizing required course maintenance.

The implementation of a course delivery carousel has improved the consistency of course offerings and has also increased the enrollment density in most courses. The predictable rotation has benefitted academic advising as well; however, effectively serving students with myriad transfer courses and credits has created the unforeseen challenge of ensuring they have appropriate courses available for them to continue to progress in their degree plan. To mitigate these potential stall points, a comprehensive examination of the curriculum is necessary to evaluate courses that carry prerequisites to ensure that the completion of a prior course is truly *requisite* to success. As a safeguard, courses that are re-categorized as carrying *pre-recommendations* will be augmented to include disclaimers and suggestions for accessing foundational support materials.

Further, a new Strategic Initiative for 2024-25 focused around using technology to improve engagement in online courses will inform the NextGen5 initiative to augment course shell quality with formalized and standardized instructor interaction and engagement schema. As a result, instructor efforts will be intentionally focused to better serve the disparate needs of students, while communication and support systems between students, instructors, and the institution will be improved.

In the face of inexorable advancements of Generative AI and its inevitable impact on the educational process, the entire online course catalog must be heavily modified to integrate more authentic assignments throughout. Furthermore, both students and instructors will require training and support to ensure that they learn to ethically and responsibly use the tools available to them. Ultimately, our pedagogies must continue to evolve away from assessment of the *product* submitted in fulfillment of a given assignment and instead focus on the *process* used to create it.

As many of the structural improvements and advancements made are fairly esoteric and complex, continued work with our marketing team is needed to develop a coordinated message that describes the benefits in ways that are meaningful for prospective students as they make their educational choice.

Given the successes demonstrated by the Online Enrollment Management team in servicing non-traditional, adult, and particularly transfer students, the on-campus admissions/enrollment office is being reconceived to align more closely with the structure and processes of the online team. While several re-organizational possibilities, including combining staff, are being explored to potentially increase efficiency and effectiveness, great care must be taken to ensure that the advancements made in the online sector are not undermined by a decrease in resources.

Finally, an organizational transition will continue to move to a more centralized online program administration model to ensure better oversight and support structures focused on serving the unique needs of non-traditional, adult, and transfer students.

In Sum

As evidenced by its two trademarked taglines: *Challenge Conventional Wisdom* and *Without Risk There Is No Gain*, TU has long embraced a culture of innovation. Armed with this historic ethos, as well as a core team of creative and dedicated faculty and staff, TU has engaged in a purposeful and proactive transformation to its systems, structures, and curriculum to better support its non-traditional, adult, and transfer students. As with any change management process, progress was neither linear nor smooth. Results, however, are undeniable: declining enrollment trends have reversed, and TU has begun to differentiate itself from its peers to take a position as a leader in providing quality education tailored to the evolving needs of its diverse student population. Though the work is far from complete, TU's intentional investment in adult, distance, and graduate learning has begun to pay dividends, both in the internal coffers and more importantly, in meeting the needs of its students and preparing them for the demands of the modern workforce.

Contributors

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