

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

HIGHER EDUCATION BILL COULD HEAT UP COMPETITION FOR ADULT STUDENTS

Focus on shorter programs, competency-based offerings is seen providing more options for older students

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December 18, 2017

The Republican bid to overhaul higher education is likely to heat up competition in the fastest-growing segment of the college market: adults over the age of 24.

When Congress passed the Higher Education Act in 1965, about one in four students were adults. Today, nearly 40 percent of college students are 25 or older.

The bill proposed by Republicans earlier this month aims to better align academic programs with employer needs by encouraging schools to offer shorter, faster credentials and providing credit for prior experience, including skills people learn on the job.

Such a radical rethinking of higher education could accelerate an already intense fight for older students.

The push to enroll older students is a sign of the pressure colleges face as the pool of freshly minted high-school graduates plateaus following years of growth as generational demographics shift. Unlike recent high school grads, many adult students work full-time, have families and are looking for flexible courses with online components.

It also **reflects an economic imperative** for more educated workers. By 2020, 35 percent of job openings will require at least a bachelor's degree and two-thirds will require some type of postsecondary credential, the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce projects.

Nearly 37 million American adults have some college credits but no degree, and millions more are hoping to accelerate their careers with professional certifications.

States including Mississippi and Tennessee are pouring money into programs that try to draw adults back to school, while schools like Arizona State University, Western Governors University – an online university based in Utah – and even tiny liberal arts colleges are scrambling to enroll students far outside the traditional 18-24 age range.

The pursuit of adult students was behind Purdue University's surprise acquisition of for-profit Kaplan University, the large online education provider. That deal, **announced earlier this year**, would add roughly 30,000 adult learners to Purdue's base.

"Pretty much everyone is addressing adults in one way or another," said Lewis Sanborne, who heads strategic enrollment planning for Ruffalo Noel Levitz, a higher education consulting firm. He cited schools in thriving metro markets pitching to be the preferred education provider of area companies, as well as strapped rural schools eager for a lifeline.

This spring, there were more than 18 million students enrolled in two-and four-year colleges, and 38 percent of them were over the age of 24.

A crackdown on for-profit colleges under the Obama administration led nonprofit and public schools to ramp up their recruitment of adult students. Those institutions have adopted some of the tactics of their for-profit counterparts including TV ads, call centers that handle student inquiries and armies of untenured teachers.

Programs catering to adults have grown fast. Colorado State University-Global, an online-only school that caters to adults seeking to complete degrees, launched in 2008 and now has nearly 19,000 students.

And Southern New Hampshire University went from 2,415 campus-based students and 11,019 online in the 2011-12 academic year to 3,027 and 89,428, respectively, last year. Adults over 24 make up most of its online students.

The programs attract college dropouts and those who have never gone to college as well as white-collar workers seeking to advance their careers. Some schools are expanding their rosters of graduate degrees, while many others are focusing on short courses that provide certifications. These programs often blur the line between higher education and corporate training by **partnering with companies** to craft the curriculum.

The House bill, which passed out of committee on party lines last week, could give for-profit schools a lift by loosening some Obama-era regulations on the sector. The measure would repeal "gainful employment" regulations that tie access to federal aid to whether career programs lead to decent-paying jobs and make it easier for online schools to enroll students from a variety of states.

In the separate tax bill, Republicans in the House and Senate agreed this week to **maintain the tax-free status** of employer tuition benefits, which lets employees receive as much as \$5,250 annually for college courses.

Students like Jesse Hamilton, 36 years old, see advantages in delaying their education. A chief diver in the Navy with a wife and two children, he is pursuing a computer-science degree online.

A recent course in organizational leadership at Arizona State University confirmed for him that he made the right decision to delay college until later in life.

"I talked with a lot of my classmates, one guy was 22 years old; I thought to myself, 'What in the world do you know about leadership, kid? What have you led, a hot dog stand?'" Mr. Hamilton said.