Research on Adult Learners: Supporting the Needs of a Student Population that Is No Longer Nontraditional

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Adult students have been a growing presence on college campuses during recent decades and there are numerous indicators that these students, often referred to as “nontraditional,” constitute a significant proportion of the undergraduate student body. National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) data indicate that 38 percent of the 2007 enrollment of more than eighteen million college students were twenty-five years of age or older (NCES 2009). NCES projections of higher education enrollment from 2007–2018 suggest that the number of students over twenty-five will remain stable or increase during the current decade (Hussar and Bailey 2009). Although the focus of this issue of Peer Review and the remainder of this article will be on adults beginning or continuing their enrollment as college students at a later-than-typical age, a 2002 NCES report has frequently been cited as noting that when the term “nontraditional student” is defined more broadly to include seven characteristics not typically associated with participation in college, a full 73 percent of students may be viewed as nontraditional (Choy 2002, 1). These characteristics include

- entry to college delayed by at least one year following high school,
- having dependents,
- being a single parent,
- being employed full time,
- being financially independent,
- attending part time, and
- not having a high school diploma.

K. Patricia Cross referred to some of the same student groups using the term “non-traditional” some twenty years ago (Cross 1981). The social and economic forces that have led to adults’ increased participation of in higher education in the decades since Cross used this term are not likely to abate in the near future. These influences include an aging and increasingly diverse population, the rapid pace of technological change, and the constantly shifting demands of the workplace in this era of a global economy. Adult learners who experience academic success in higher education tend to gain economic and personal benefits, which most likely provide social, political, and economic benefits for the broader society (Ritt 2008).

Multiple Roles of Adult Learners

A key characteristic distinguishing reentry adults from other college students is the high likelihood that they are juggling other life roles while attending school, including those of worker, spouse or partner, parent, caregiver, and community member. These roles may be assets, both through the social supports they provide and through the rich life experiences that may help adult learners make meaning of theoretical constructs that may be purely abstract to younger learners. Yet more often, these multiple roles present challenges in students’ allocation of time for both academic study and participation in campus-based organizations and activities. A 2003 NCES report titled Work First, Study Second indicated that at least 56 percent of students over age twenty-four who were included in the 1999–2000 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study saw themselves as workers first and students second, while 26 percent identified themselves as students who work. Only 18 percent did not work while enrolled (Berker and Horn 2003, 5). This report also noted that those students who considered themselves employees first were also more likely to be married, leaving them with at least three life roles to manage while attending school; this
group was also less likely to complete a degree in six years.

**PROGRAMMATIC RESPONSES TO ADULT LEARNERS**

Reentry adults’ multiple roles and commitments increase the likelihood they will look for degree and certificate programs that provide them flexibility in time and locations for both course completion and for access to key student services. In recent decades, a number of institutions have been designed around the needs of adult students, such as Empire State University, Fielding Institute, Regis University, and, more recently, the University of Phoenix and many other institutions in the for-profit sector. Within the last decade, institutions and programs geared toward serving adult students have been profiled in a number of sources, including *Lifelong Learning at Its Best: Innovative Practices in Adult Credit Programs* (Maehl 2000) and volumes of *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, including one on accelerated learning (Wlodkowski and Kasworm 2003) and another on adult degree programs (Papas and Jerman 2004). The innovative student support and learning strategies described in these sources are rarely found in traditional university programs, but could provide useful models for adaptation. One example of this type of program is Empire State’s faculty mentor model, which allows students to develop highly individualized programs of study. Other innovative adult learning practices—such as distance learning, accelerated course formats, and prior learning assessment—were previously uncommon in mainstream institutions or departments, but are increasingly commonplace today in traditional universities that range from small liberal arts institutions to large comprehensive and doctoral institutions.

**Distance Education**

NCES reported in 2008 that at least two-thirds of two-year and four-year Title IV degree-granting institutions offered online courses, blended/hybrid courses, or courses offered in other distance education formats for college-level credit (Parsad and Lewis 2008). The report, titled *Distance Education at Degree-Granting Postsecondary Institutions: 2006-2007*, indicates that online courses were offered by 61 percent of institutions, blended/hybrid courses at 35 percent of institutions and other forms of distance education were offered at 26 percent of institutions. Thirty-two percent of all two-year and four-year institutions reported offering college-level degree or certificate programs delivered totally through distance education. The factor most commonly cited as affecting the decision to offer distance education courses or programs was meeting student demand for flexible schedules, as reported by 68 percent of responding institutions. Nearly two-thirds of institutions reported an interest in providing access to college for students who do not otherwise have access; only 45 percent of institutions reported an interest in increasing student enrollment as a key factor (Parsad and Lewis 2008).

**Prior Learning Assessment**

A 2006 study by the Council on Adult Experiential Learning (CAEL) on the use of assessment of prior college-level learning as a means of acquiring college credit found that 87 percent of responding institutions accepted College-Level Examination Program (CLEP) exams, 84 percent accepted Advanced Placement credits, 70 percent accepted credit for corporate or military training (evaluated by the American Council on Education), and 66 percent made provisions for faculty evaluation of student portfolios demonstrating prior college level learning (Klein-Collins and Hein 2009, 187). While portfolio evaluation was not the most common form of prior learning assessment (PLA), an increase in acceptance of this method can be seen when compared to previous studies conducted by CAEL in 1996 (when 55 percent of institutions reported use of portfolios) and in 1991 (when 50 percent of institutions reported use) (Klein-Collins and Hein 2009, 188).

A more recent CAEL report, *Fueling the Race to Postsecondary Success: A 48-Instution Study of Prior Learning Assessment and Adult Student Outcomes* (Klein-Collins 2010), addresses faculty concerns about adult students getting “credit for life experience” by focusing on a study conducted by CAEL on student outcomes. Based on over 62,000 academic records of adult students from a geographically diverse institutional sample from forty-six percent public institutions, the study showed that 50 percent private of nonprofit institutions and 4 percent of for-profit institutions describe several positive outcomes for students who earned credit through prior learning assessment, when compared with students who did not make use of PLA (6–7, 12). Adult students who earned credit for prior learning were more likely to earn a bachelor’s degree within seven years—43 percent—in comparison to 15 percent of non-PLA students (7). Focusing only on the approximately 30 percent of students who matriculated in pursuit of a bachelor’s degree, the study found that 58 percent of PLA students were successful in achieving that goal, compared to only 27 percent of non-PLA students (35).

Differences in degree completion between PLA and non-PLA students were also found when controlling for GPA—66 percent of PLA students with GPAs of 3.0 or above completed degrees, compared to 35 percent of non-PLA students with similar GPAs (37). Furthermore, dramatic differences in graduation rates were reported between PLA and non-PLA students for both Hispanic and black students, with 40 percent of black PLA students completing bachelor’s degrees compared to 17 percent
of black non-PLA students, and 47 percent of Hispanic PLA students completing bachelor’s degrees compared to 6 percent of Hispanic non-PLA students (50). These CAEL report findings suggest that providing opportunities for prior learning assessment may have a substantial effect on adult student persistence.

**Accelerated Course Formats**

Courses, certificates, and degrees designed to be completed in a shorter time frame and in which either course duration or contact hours may be modified are learning formats that tend to be more responsive to adult learners’ lives (Wlodkowski 2003). Although these intensive learning experiences are sometimes criticized as formats that prioritize convenience over rigor and sacrifice breadth and depth, a number of studies indicate that adult learning in accelerated courses is comparable to or better than that of younger students enrolled in conventional courses. For instance, Wlodkowski reports a qualitative study indicating that intensive courses “became rewarding and powerful learning experiences when certain attributes were present … These attributes included instructor enthusiasm and expertise (usually gained through experience), active learning, classroom interaction, good course organization, student input, a collegial classroom atmosphere, and a relaxed environment” (9) When adult students in accelerated courses are compared with younger students in conventional versions of the same types of courses, both groups of students generally have shown positive and similar attitudes toward their courses. Finally, when attitudes of alumni toward accelerated courses in management, human resource management, and corporate finance were assessed, their perceptions were nearly as positive as current students who responded to the same survey (10).

**THEORIES OF ADULT LEARNING**

While much of what is written about adapting to adult learners within higher education focuses on ways in which institutions and programs can modify student services and course delivery formats and systems to accommodate the needs of reentry students, adult education research also provides insight into understanding the characteristics of these learners within the classroom or distance education environment (Ross-Gordon 2003).

**Frameworks for Understanding Adult Learning**

In recent decades, several theoretical approaches to adult learning have served as useful lenses for research on adult learners; these frameworks help researchers think about practices across various contexts of adult learning, including the college classroom. *Andragogy* is arguably the best-known of these theoretical approaches. Malcolm Knowles is credited with bringing this framework to attention in North America, although he acknowledged its previous European origins (Knowles 1980). According to this framework, adults are assumed to

- prefer self-direction in learning,
- bring a vast reservoir of experience that should be considered in planning learning experience,
- exhibit a readiness to learn that is based on a need to know something or do something,
- exhibit an orientation to learning that is task- or problem-centered rather than subject-centered, and
- exhibit a relatively high degree of internal motivation.

While andragogy has been widely debated by scholars, who note the situational variables that influence the degree to which adults exhibit these characteristics, this framework is one of the most enduring and widely cited theories of adult learning (Merriam 2001).

Other adult learning theories center on *self-directed learning* (SDL), a key assumption of andragogy and itself the focus of numerous professional conferences and papers. One SDL theory posited that educational goals within formal education could be supported by using teaching methods and assignments designed to increase learner control of the learning process relative to that of instructors (Candy 1991). Other theories suggest that self-directed learning can be situational and may be exhibited at different levels among college students of various ages as they encounter different learning environments (Grow 1991).

In the past twenty years, *transformative learning* (TL) has become one of the most prominent and debated theories in adult learning research, with the version of TL proposed by Jack Mezirow (2000) receiving perhaps the greatest attention. Mezirow and others view transformational learning as involving fundamental transformation of the adults’ core frames of reference, often in response to *disorienting dilemmas*—situations that challenge adults’ previous ways of thinking about the world and prompt them to reflect critically on previously held assumptions. While much of the research on transformational learning has focused on TL that occurs both in higher education and naturally as an outgrowth of adult life situations, some have also proposed that educators can help stimulate transformative learning by using teaching methods that foster critical reflection (Cranton 1994).

**RESEARCH ON ADULT LEARNERS IN COLLEGE CLASSROOMS**

A number of studies have explored the characteristics of adult learners in the college classroom, providing substantial but not unqualified support for the assumptions linked to the theoretical frameworks of adult learning and development described above. My own chapter in a
2003 volume of New Directions for Student Services focusing on the needs of adult students reviews in greater detail than possible here the numerous studies that substantiate adult students’ preferences for active learning strategies that support cognitive growth and transformational learning, along with their desires for immediate application of knowledge and opportunities for self-direction. Yet, this same body of research also points to the lack of self-confidence often exhibited by adults upon reentry to college and their frequent desire for highly structured learning experiences that provide a clear roadmap for teacher expectations. This body of research suggests that while adult learners desire flexibility, they also often desire structure. They also exhibit varied learning styles and preferences influenced in part by their past encounters with higher education as well as by their social and cultural backgrounds, and are best not seen as a monolithic group. This is especially true when considering subpopulations of adult learners who have not consistently been included in the large body of literature on adult students, including students of color (Ross-Gordon 2005), veterans (Rumann and Hamrick 2010), and adults with disabilities (Rocco 2001).

**CONCLUSION**

“Reentry adults” appear to be a student population that is here to stay. Increasingly, higher education institutions have attempted to create programs and services that are responsive to adults’ life and learning preferences. This effort has challenged college faculty and administrators to think beyond traditional ways of teaching and delivering educational programs. A large number of institutions or program units have a long history of adaptation to the adult learner student population. For other institutions or programs this effort is more recent. Yet much can be learned from existing program’s experiences with various modes of distance learning, prior learning assessment, and intensive courses, some of which are profiled in other articles within this issue. Faculty can play an important role as change agents in creating supportive learning environments for adult learners both by incorporating theory and research on adult learners into their own classrooms and by advocating for adult-oriented programs and services on their campuses (Blair 2010). The design and delivery of these programs are key to successful undergraduate experiences for reentry adult students.

**REFERENCES**


