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Adult students, whether new or returning to higher education, experience a unique set of transition challenges. By understanding the characteristics and needs of this student cohort, colleges and universities are better able to facilitate adult student success.

Adult Students in Higher Education: A Portrait of Transitions

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For the past three decades, the face of higher education has been changing as more and more adult students have entered or reentered college. This enrollment trend accelerated in the 1970s and early 1980s, when older students, primarily women and part-time students, began to enroll in greater numbers. The number of college and university students who are twenty-five years of age and older had increased to 4.9 million by 1987. Enrollment of students aged forty or older increased 235 percent between 1978 and 1993, and according to the Council on Adult and Experiential Learning (2000), 43 percent of all students in higher education in 1997 were age twenty-five or older. Projections are that by 2010, 6.8 million college students will be age twenty-five or over (National On-Campus Reports, 2002).

Adult students are coming to institutions of higher education for myriad reasons. Many are pursuing their first postsecondary program with the goal of earning an associate or bachelor's degree. Many of these students will choose to enroll in community colleges for their first postsecondary experience as community colleges provide the access, affordability, and convenience adults require. As a result, more than half of community college students are adult students (Frey, 2007).

Other adult students have a college degree and are returning to higher education to change careers or strengthen their work skills. As baby boomers retire, many come to higher education with a long-delayed dream of a first or an advanced degree. Others simply want to learn new skills or knowledge.

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Adult Student Transitions

Whatever the motivation for enrolling, these students share a common experience: they are all facing one or more transitions in their personal or career life. For some, this transition is viewed positively as they prepare for a new career, advancement, or retirement. For others, the transition comes as a result of a negative life experience. Some have faced corporate downsizing and realize that they cannot compete in the job market without a different or an advanced degree. For these students, attending college classes becomes an additional stressor to that of losing a job and income. Some are in the middle of personal transitions because of a divorce or the loss of a spouse. These students find that in addition to the personal issues that come with such a loss, they are now forced to enter college in hopes of maintaining or improving their life situation. Too often, adults entering or reentering college face the challenge of juggling parenting, job, and school responsibilities. Many are trying to pay for college at the same time they are dealing with a reduction of income.

For many women, the motivation to attend college happens with their changing role in the family. Some are forced to enter college as they face financial difficulties as a result of divorce or the death of a spouse. Some enter after waiting for children to start school or leave home. In most cases, the adult woman returning to college does so to provide support for her family (Allen, 1993).

Whatever the event that triggers an adult student's return to college, it usually constitutes a major life change. When coupled with the added stress of applying, enrolling, and attending classes, adult students often feel disoriented as they confront the transitions. Therefore, while adjusting to the challenges and rigors of college, many adult students are creating new identities in all areas of their lives. In fact, most adult college students are a portrait of life's transitions.

Barriers Facing Adult Students

Adult students are often referred to as nontraditional students, yet not all nontraditional students are adult students. The term *nontraditional* can include traditional-aged students who share common characteristics with their adult counterparts. These characteristics often put them at risk for being unsuccessful. Such characteristics include:

- Delaying enrollment into higher education until adulthood
- Enrolling part time
- Working full time
- Being financially independent
- Being financially responsible for others
- Having family responsibilities
- Having academic deficiencies

The National Center for Education Statistics (1996) estimates that over 60 percent of students in U.S. higher education can be characterized as nontraditional. Because of these characteristics, nontraditional students who enter postsecondary education are less likely than their traditional counterparts to attain a degree or remain enrolled after five years (National Center for Education Statistics, 1996). In fact, adult students are most likely to depart from colleges within their first year of enrollment. Therefore, early intervention is needed if adult students are to persist.

The Council on Adult and Experiential Learning (2000) notes that many colleges and universities have struggled to adjust to the changing demographics on their campuses. If adult students are to be successful, colleges must strive to remove the barriers adult students face. In early research on adult students, Pinkston (1987) found that they faced procedural, environmental, psychological, and financial barriers as they pursued a degree. A more recent review found that such barriers fall into four broad categories: institutional, situational, psychological, and educational (Council on Adult and Experiential Learning, 2000; Compton, Cox, and Laanan, 2006; Donohue and Wong, 1997; Hammer, Grigsby, and Woods, 1998; Hardin, 1997; Nordstrom, 1997). These barriers represent issues that threaten the success of adult students and prevent them from meeting their academic, career, and personal goals.

Institutional Barriers. Institutional barriers are college and university policies, procedures, and red tape that hinder the progress of adult students. Often, without realizing it, an institution creates obstacles to students' progress. These might occur any time during a college career, from the moment students consider attending college to the completion of graduation requirements. Madfes (1989) found that when faced with university-imposed barriers, adult students were less tolerant than traditional students and often discontinued their education rather than adding stress to their lives.

Nordstrom (1997) and Hammer, Grigsby, and Woods (1998) found that adult students are focused on completing academic requirements in a minimum amount of time and are primarily concerned with (1) the institution's proximity to home and work; (2) availability of night, weekend, and online courses; (3) extended faculty office hours; (4) quality day care; (5) accurate academic advisement; and (6) quality instruction. Because of the barriers they face, careful academic advisement is essential for adult students. Academic advisers should be selected on the basis of knowledge about and interest in the adult learner. A major key to advising adult students is helping them create realistic long-term goals. According to the Council on Adult and Experiential Learning (2000), the connection between student goals and the path they have selected is not a one-time event conducted at the outset of the academic career. Adult students and their advisers need to continually review and revise what the student wishes to accomplish, what preparations must be made, and how the institution can help the student achieve these goals. Therefore, institutions must select

competent and well-trained advisers who are alert to the special problems of adult students.

In the past fifteen years, online courses have been created as one way to reduce institutional barriers, and these courses have provided access to students who never before had a chance to attend college. However, adult students need to be aware that not all online programs are accredited, and some fail to deliver what is promised. As Allen noted in 1993, it is important that students choose to attend the right institution for the right reason. This is more important as new options are created daily. Too often college recruiters are more concerned with enrollment numbers than meeting the needs of the student.

Compton, Cox, and Laanan (2006) stress that colleges need to take a proactive approach to uncovering the needs of adult students rather than waiting for exit interviews of those who are leaving. Many campuses have created offices in which the only focus is to work with adult students. These offices help adult students learn about nontraditional scholarship programs, registration, advising, counseling, career choices, health services, parking, financial aid, housing, networking with other students, and commuting problems, and their staff can answer questions about courses, programs, and instructors.

Situational Barriers. Kerka (1989) describes situational barriers common to adult students such as role conflicts, time management issues, family and work problems, economics, and logistics. Situational barriers cannot be removed by the college or university because they are unique to the individual. Therefore, adult students facing such barriers need services that will smooth their academic adjustment by allowing them to focus on their role as a student. Awareness of the needs and characteristics of adult learners allows institutions to address some of these barriers and improve the transition experience. Lack of financial support, for example, may prevent an adult student from entering or remaining enrolled at the college or university. Eifler and Potthoff (1998) found that finances were a crucial concern of older students. Generally these students are financially independent and have responsibility for others as well. In addition, the financial needs of adult students differ from those of traditional students because of the added costs of housing and child care. Genzuk and Baca (1998) found that adult students are often in low-paying jobs at the time they enter teacher education programs and are afraid of incurring additional debt. Therefore, they might fail to seek the student loans and financial aid available to them. In order to meet these expenses, adult students often continue to work full time while carrying a full course load. For many, this becomes a recipe for disaster.

Because situational barriers can include everything from a lack of affordable housing to a need for legal aid, many institutions have found that an effective way to provide necessary information to returning adult students is through a directory of resources that includes both on- and off-campus organizations. In addition to essential services provided by the

college or university, such directories should include information and telephone numbers for church organizations, legal assistance, crisis call lines, safe houses for abused women, and other community services.

The Council on Adult and Experiential Learning (2000) notes that although an increasing number of educators have come to recognize the important role that support services play in the lives of adult learners, the misperception still exists that adult learners are self-supporting and do not need the same level of support as eighteen- to twenty-three-year-old students. In reality, adult learners need at least as much assistance as traditional-aged students, and sometimes more.

Psychological Barriers. Psychological barriers include inadequate coping skills, lack of self-confidence and poor self-image, anxiety about schooling based on prior experience, and negative beliefs or expectations about outcomes (Kerka, 1989). Donohue and Wong (1997) found that adult students were more likely to be at risk for psychological distress than their traditional counterparts and that their needs may be overlooked in a traditional university setting.

In many cases, the adult learner is the first in the family to attend college. Therefore, family support is critical if these students are to succeed. To help secure support from family, social events should be planned for adult students and their families. Adult students should also be encouraged to be more integrated into the social life of the institution. Research shows that students who are more involved in the life of the campus are more likely to persist (National On-Campus Reports, 2002). One way to encourage adult students to participate in campus activities is to include activities for children.

Adult students often go through an identity crisis as they enroll or reenroll in college. Many of these students have neglected their own educational goals while helping spouses or children attain theirs. Other adult students enroll in college after spending years in careers and find it traumatic to be novices after having been successful in their occupations. One adult student maintained that such changes destroy one's ego (Madfes, 1989). Subjects in Madfes's research who began college after a successful career expressed the same feelings of vulnerability as traditional-aged students beginning their first careers after college. Therefore, faculty and advisers must be aware of this issue and work with adult students who are making the transition from being an expert to being a novice.

Adult students often feel isolated on the college and university campus. Eifler and Potthoff (1998) emphasize that cohort groups can help overcome the feelings of isolation that accompany a career change. Nordstrom (1997) found that adult learners easily become isolated from the academic community, and their success depends on opportunities to interact with others who have similar interests and manage multiple roles.

Educational Barriers. Unfortunately, many adult students are not prepared academically. There are numerous reasons for their academic deficiencies. The most common is they sometimes made a decision or decisions

that have adversely affected their academic futures. These poor choosers are misprepared rather than underprepared (Hardin, 1997). Typically, poor choosers made decisions that were detrimental to their academic future for one of two reasons. Some poor choosers selected something other than a college preparatory curriculum while they were in high school and therefore are ill prepared for the demands made by the college environment. A second type of poor chooser is the student who dropped out of high school. Many of these students eventually earn a general educational development (GED) diploma and enroll in college with a false sense of security about their academic ability. What they often fail to understand is that a GED measures their ability to complete the most basic of high-school-level work. It does not measure their ability to be successful in college.

Some adult students experience academic difficulties because they have been away from an academic setting for an extended time. Those who have not used skills they learned in high school for several years will find they need practice as they return to college. Some students face academic problems because they have a physical or learning disability, which makes classroom activities a challenge (Hardin, 1997). Many adult learners speak a primary language other than English, and they may struggle to keep up with their classmates.

The Council on Adult and Experiential Learning (2000) notes that the assistance provided to adult students with academic deficiencies is a litmus test for the extent to which the institution is focused on adult learning. Adult-focused institutions provide support so students can hone their academic skills before launching directly into credit-bearing work toward a degree.

Overcoming the Barriers

In spite of the challenges they face, the picture for adult students is not completely bleak. Adult students bring experiences to classrooms that enhance learning for students of any age. Adults are often described by their instructors as more eager, motivated, and committed than their traditional-age counterparts. Faculty are often enthusiastic about teaching these students because of their unique abilities and the richness they bring to the classroom through their diverse backgrounds (Wayne State University, 2000). Once enrolled at a college or university, most adult students say they plan to obtain a degree there.

Knowles (1984) wrote extensively about how adults learn and used the term *andragogy* to describe the art and science of helping adults learn. His basic argument is that adults do not learn in the same way as children and should not be taught in the same manner as children are. Knowles emphasized that adults are self-directed and expect to take responsibility for personal decisions. Adult students want to understand why they need to learn material, and they learn best when they can use the information

immediately. Strategies such as case studies, role playing, simulations, and self-evaluation are most useful.

Adult learners recognize and appreciate good teaching (Knowles, 1984). They desire instructors who adopt the role of facilitator or resource rather than lecturer or grader. Therefore, reducing educational barriers for adult students means creating new roles for faculty that include managing and facilitating student learning, not just lecturing or providing direct instruction.

Adult students desire course work that has practical applications. Adults tend to be career focused, and they often value courses and assignments that are relevant to their goals (Allen, 1993). Workplace projects support this concept. Because they must carve out time to study while balancing many roles, they want to know what is expected of them. It is critical that they get feedback early in the term. However, as Imel (1994) notes, a favorite adage of adult educators is that "adult learners vote with their feet." When faced with learning environments that fail to meet their needs, adult students simply stop coming to class.

College and University Interventions

The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (2000) notes that without good models, colleges and universities will continue to struggle as they serve the growing population of adult students. Based on research at institutions that have been successful working with adult students, the council identified eight principles of effectiveness for serving adult learners. These principles describe processes and approaches that colleges and universities seeking to improve access and quality for adult students can adopt:

> *Outreach.* The institution conducts its outreach to adult learners by overcoming barriers in time, place, and tradition in order to create lifelong access to educational opportunities.
>
> *Life and career planning.* The institution addresses adult learners' life and career goals before or at the onset of enrollment in order to assess and align its capacities to help learners reach their goals.
>
> *Financing.* The institution promotes choice using an array of payment options for adult learners in order to expand equity and financial flexibility.
>
> *Assessment of learning outcomes.* The institution defines and assesses the knowledge, skills, and competencies acquired by adult learners from both the curriculum and life/work experience in order to assign credit and confer degrees with rigor.
>
> *Teaching-learning process.* The institution's faculty uses multiple methods of instruction (including experiential and problem-based methods) for adult learners in order to connect curricular concepts to useful knowledge and skills.
>
> *Student support systems.* The institution assists adult learners by using comprehensive academic and student support systems in order to enhance students' capacities to become self-directed, lifelong learners.

> *Technology*. The institution uses information technology to provide relevant and timely information and enhance the learning experience.
> *Strategic partnerships*. The institution engages in strategic relationships, partnerships, and collaborations with employers and other organizations in order to develop and improve educational opportunities for adult learners. (p. 5)

Recognizing the transitional state of adult learners, Frey (2007) notes that the Council on Adult and Experiential Learning recently identified a ninth principle: transitions, described as "supporting guided pathways that lead into and from the institution's programs and services in order to ensure that students' learning will apply usefully to achieving their educational and career goals" (p. 5). In order to help students make the transition to and from their academic programs, the following activities are suggested:

- Create new and expanded course delivery, which includes weekend course offerings and expanded distance education programs.
- Create an adult services office to meet the needs of adult students.
- Redesign Web sites to include information for adult students.
- Redesign traditional orientation sessions to address the unique concerns of adult learners.
- Create programs to assist students with academic deficiencies in the transition to college.
- Create a student mentor or adviser program to help new students negotiate college processes and procedures.
- Form articulation programs between community colleges and universities to promote the smooth advancement of adult students.
- Promote accessibility by providing services at times convenient for adult learners.
- Select and train advisers to work with adult students.
- Form an "adult learner" committee or task force to review issues related to adult students.

Conclusion

For many adult students, returning to college and fulfilling their goals is much like building a house of cards. In order to be successful, each part of their lives must be in place and carefully balanced. When changes occur, whether these changes are created by the student, family, or the institution, this careful balance collapses. Too often, the student then feels that the only option is to drop out. College and university administrators must recognize the needs of this special population and be advocates for adult students. When this occurs, adult learners come to see themselves as capable of handling the transitions of life while becoming lifelong learners.

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