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Adult learners : motivations, barriers, and retention

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Abstract

Older students often have different needs and experiences than their younger counterparts (Cross, 1981). This paper examines three areas concerning adult students. These include 1) adults' motivations in seeking post-secondary education, 2) the barriers experienced by adult learners, and 3) what assistance adult learners need to successfully complete their educational goals.

Adult Learners:

Motivations, Barriers, and Retention

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Jill Annette Moe

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Education has become a necessary part of life for many people in the world today. Changes in demographic factors and technology have insured that a traditional education will no longer last a lifetime (Cross, 1981).

Merriam & Caffarella (1991) found that demographically the median age has increased. Adults from the majority population have become better educated and better off financially. There has also been growth in cultural and ethnic diversity, with minority adults more likely to be unemployed, low-income and less educated than the majority population. Technological advances and an increased knowledge base have caused continual, life-long learning to become a requirement for anyone wishing to improve their lives in any way (Merriam & Caffarella, 1991).

Due to these changes the number of adults returning to, or entering into, post-secondary education has increased tremendously. According to Gwaltney (1995), 38 percent of the college student population in 1995 was over 25 years old. The "aging" of students can impact what courses are offered, how they are offered, and times and locations.

Older students often have different needs and experiences than their younger counterparts (Cross, 1981). One example, found by Cleveland-Innes (1994), is that adult learners have difficulty integrating into student life, but have a strong commitment to achieving their academic goals in higher education. Colleges should examine the different needs of adult learners in order to better serve this growing segment of the student population (Kinnick & Ricks, 1993). By examining adult needs, higher education can improve their efforts to serve this growing population effectively (Richter & Witten, 1984).

This paper examines three areas concerning adult students. These include 1) adults' motivations in seeking post-secondary education, 2) the barriers experienced by adult learners, and 3) what assistance adult learners need to successfully complete their educational goals.

What Motivates Adult Learners

Many studies have attempted to understand the motivations of adult learners for pursuing post-secondary education. The major reason most commonly given has been job or career related. Many individuals

seek further education in order to advance in their chosen career or to implement a career change. In some cases, continuing education is mandated by federal or state legislation or a professional organization, as in the case of teachers or medical personnel (Cross, 1981; Mercer, 1993; Merriam & Caffarella, 1991).

It has been found that most adults participating in higher education are already better educated than the norm and have better financial resources (Merriam & Caffarella, 1991). Their education has allowed them to achieve greater career success, thus giving them greater financial benefits which allows for more leisure time in which to continue their education. Cross (1981) stated that the more people learn the more they want to learn and this appears to be the case with adult learners.

Other reasons often cited for adult learning were personal fulfillment, family, leisure, and self-interest such as hobbies, health, and public service (Merriam & Cafarrella, 1991). Cross (1981) found that "the reasons people give for learning correspond consistently and logically to the life situations" (p. 81) of the individuals seeking further education.

Many women adult learners base their decision to participate in higher education on what Ross (1988) called "life events." These life changing events were generally influenced by experiences such as divorce, empty nest syndrome, or geographic relocation. Women's decisions concerning higher education can also be affected by their self-esteem. Women often have less confidence and are less independent than their male counterparts. This lack of confidence may cause many adult women to feel they are unable to successfully compete in the academic arena (Borman & Guido-DiBrito, 1986).

Barriers in Higher Education for Adult Learners

Barriers faced by adult learners have been identified by various authors (Cross, 1981; Merriam & Caffarella, 1991; Naretto, 1995; Richter & Witten, 1984). These authors see barriers as any influence that impacts an individual's decision not to pursue an academic career, not to continue their learning activities, or to "drop-out." Adults most often cite cost and lack of time as the primary reasons for not participating in higher education (Merriam & Caffarella, 1991). Other reasons include family

responsibilities, job responsibilities, scheduling

problems, institutional requirements, child care,

transportation, lack of confidence, lack of interest,

and lack of identity with the institution of choice

(Cross, 1981; Merriam & Caffarella, 1991; Naretto,

1995; Richter & Witten, 1984).

Cross (1981) places barriers to learning into

three groups. The first she calls "situational

barriers" (p. 98) which pertain to an individual's life

situation at the time of educational opportunity. This

category would include lack of time, cost, child care,

and transportation. Cost and lack of time lead the

list of barriers not to pursue an education. Cross

also speculates that people who may have the time do

not always have the money, while the reverse may also

be true. She notes that cost has become a socially

acceptable reason for making education a low priority

when compared to something else.

The second group, "institutional barriers" (Cross,

1981, p. 98), is comprised of an institution's

practices and procedures that keep adults from

participating in higher education. Included in this

type of barrier are poorly scheduled classes,

inconvenient locations, and lack of need for the courses offered. Cross (1981) separates this group into five areas. The first is scheduling problems, where the course time conflicts with adults' schedules. The second area includes problems with class location or available transportation for reaching class. If a potential student lives 50 miles away and does not have reliable transportation that person may not enroll in any classes. The third area is lack of interesting courses along with few course offerings. Adults will not attend courses that do not meet their needs, even when location, cost, and scheduling make attendance feasible. Procedural problems and time requirements comprise the fourth area. This would include such things as problems being admitted to a college or the length of time needed to complete a program or degree. The fifth area is a general lack of information about programs and procedures. People can not make informed decisions if they do not have current and accurate information (Cross, 1981).

The last group, "dispositional barriers" (Cross, 1981, p. 98), is related to the individual's attitudes and perceptions of self as a learner. Cross stated

that the main problem with these barriers is that
education may not be seen as socially desirable. Also,
people who have negative feelings due to their past
educational experiences are less likely to want to
continue their education or may feel they do not have
the ability to learn and succeed. Because of these
attitudes and beliefs, adults may say that education
costs too much, that they do not have the time to
devote to classes. It is easier to say these types of
things than it is to say one is not interested, is too
old, or does not have the ability (Cross, 1981).

Merriam and Caffarella (1991) reviewed barriers
from sociological and psychological perspectives. They
stated that sociological barriers exist when there is a
lack of support from family and friends. If family
and/or friends view education as futile, then the
potential adult student tends to view it in the same
way. Merriam and Caffarella (1991) also believe that
the people in power within the socioeconomic and
political arenas are more than content for the less
educated to stay that way. The authors indicated that
the problem of attracting people from lower
socioeconomic levels is in reality a sociological

problem. They felt that "people's decisions to participate have less to do with needs and motives than with their position in society and the social experiences that have shaped their lives" (Merriam and Caffarella, 1991, p. 95).

Psychological barriers exist when adults do not believe they are capable of learning and expect only failure. Even if adult learners receive support from family, friends, and educational institutions, they do not possess enough self-esteem to achieve any type of educational goal. This is usually based on early life experiences, as when early authority figures viewed education as unimportant or where the individual experienced failure (Merriam & Caffarella, 1991).

Naretto (1995) examined individuals' memberships in communities in light of external and internal barriers to higher education. She defined external barriers as family, friends, co-workers, and employers. For example, if the external group views education as a threat to the status quo, in the family, on the job, or even on the bowling team, they may not be supportive of the adult considering higher education. Internal barriers include course offerings, scheduling of

classes, and the integration of adult learners into the academic community. Colleges must offer opportunity and inclusion in order to attract adult learners.

Richter & Witten (1984) studied the difference between adults' expectations of barriers in higher education when compared to the real barriers they experienced. The most anticipated and experienced barriers involved cost, length of time to complete a degree, lack of time, and home and job responsibilities.

Retaining Adult Learners in Higher Education

In the recent past, recruitment of students in higher education has become very competitive. Colleges are finding that they can not depend solely on traditional students to maintain their enrollment and are encouraging adults to enroll. Since the percentage of adults in higher education is increasing, the barriers they experience must be identified and lessened in the hopes of retaining these more sophisticated students (Kinnick & Ricks, 1993).

Institutions need to examine the barriers adults perceive and experience in higher education in order to alleviate them. It may also help adults to anticipate

other barriers which can give them a realistic view of
the possible problems they may face in pursuing an
education (Richter & Witten, 1984).

Adult learners who did not do well in past
academic experiences often do not feel they can even
gain admission to higher education. When reviewing
adult applications, admissions professionals should
consider the length of time between individuals'
previous educational experiences and their current
educational goals in determining admission status.
They could also consider admitting adults who have not
obtained the usual high school credentials (Cleveland-
Innes, 1994).

Adult learners often lack information regarding
alternative methods of earning college credit (Cross,
1991; Reehling, 1980). Increased publicity regarding
course credit, course content, and schedules would
improve retention efforts involving adults.
Telecourses, correspondence courses, extension courses,
and distance learning are ways of offering courses to
those adults who are unable to attend courses on
campus.

A major factor for adult women in continuing education, and finishing, is the ability of individuals to cope with multiple roles (Mercer, 1993). Many women find furthering their education difficult, if not impossible, due to time commitments. They must prioritize their roles as wives, mothers, workers, housekeepers, students, and often care-givers to elderly family members. With multiple demands on women's time, the role of student will usually be placed on hold while other roles are fulfilled. This may also be the case for single-parent fathers. Colleges should focus on helping all adult learners improve their coping skills as a means of retention (Naretto, 1995).

Another area that higher education needs to consider is the life stage of adult learners (Cross, 1981). Adults' life stages can affect their willingness to pursue further education. Life stages can affect adults' learning style, their self-perception of learning abilities, their motivation in seeking further education, and their integration into the college experience. Traditional-aged learners usually learn quickly, but older learners are often

better problem solvers since they may be able to relate a new situation to a past experience. Many adults believe that because of their age they are unable to learn and that the learning phase of their life is over. People at mid-life often have more complex multiple roles compared to their younger counterparts. The demands created by these roles may cause education to be a low priority (Cleveland-Innes, 1994).

Retention can be strongly affected by the support and encouragement adults learners receive. Support from employers and co-workers is very important, while support from the institution, faculty, and other students is critical (Naretto, 1995). The college community's efforts to aid in academic integration can have a direct effect on individuals' commitment to learning. Since academic integration is critical to retention (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991), colleges should consider establishing adult student support groups, academic advising geared to the adult concerns, and, if possible, mentoring by faculty members. Support groups can include traditional-age students which might help adults feel included and valued by their younger counterparts. Also, academic advising

can include peer advisors who already have experience with college and can help new students adjust to their role as student. Mentoring brings positive support from faculty which can help reinforce adult students' commitment to learning.

Developing programs that are attractive to adult learners and that meet their educational goals will help colleges in the recruitment and retention of adult learners (Cross, 1991). If the programs that are offered do not meet adult needs, there will be little or no incentive to participate.

Conclusion

The reasons adults seek higher education range from simple to complex. Due to the wide variety of reasons for adult participation, it can be difficult for institutions to accommodate adult learners. However, since the adult segment of the college student population is growing, colleges must be ready and willing to meet the needs of these individuals.

It is possible to develop programs with adults in mind. Course times and locations can greatly influence the decision to enroll. If the courses are accessible and appropriate to their needs, adults will attend.

The adage "success breeds success" applies to adult students. Once adults have been successful in a course, the chances of them continuing their education increases. Other areas that can aid in retaining adult students are day care, transportation pools, scholarships, credit for life experience, and support/study groups.

Many adults today are finding that they must learn new skills, whether for their employment or personal satisfaction. Education is necessary in order for adults to keep abreast of technological advances. Education can also aid adult learners in improving their decision-making skills. In the future, adults who never thought they would formally learn more may find themselves in some form of higher education. If the mission of higher education is to serve its students, and by doing so to serve society, meeting the needs of adult learners must be a priority for colleges and universities.

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