Adult Learners in Higher Education

Maria Maddox

Western Carolina University
National Center for Education Statistics data (2009) indicates that “38 percent of the 2007 enrollment of more than eighteen million college students were twenty-five years of age or older”. The NCES outlines nontraditional students as a student who falls into one of the following seven categories: “delayed enrollment into postsecondary education; attends college part-time; works full time; is financially independent for financial aid purposes; has dependents other than a spouse; is a single parent; or does not have a high school diploma” (Pelletier, 2010). Adult learners are often nontraditional students, and statistics project that the number of adult learners in higher education will continue to increase in years to come (Jameson & Fusco, 2014). Adult students often face many different challenges than traditional students due to their circumstances (Jameson & Fusco, 2014). Many believe there are factors, in addition to the standard issues, that affect their success in higher education or lack thereof (Pelletier, 2010). Research indicates that several of the challenges that adult learners includes issues of student engagement, environmental, commuter student, part-time student, transfer student, returning student, and multiple life roles (Silverman, Aliabadi, & Stiles, 2009). The adult learner is predictably someone who requires a program that allows them the ability to balance life and educational ambitions. In this paper, these common issues are addressed and there will be ideas provided that demonstrate how adult learners may be better accommodated in higher education.

**Engagement Issues**

As nontraditional students, adult learners often do not have the same advantage as traditional students in regards to the benefits of being an involved
Historically speaking, traditional students are engaged on campus because they are campus residents, enrolled full-time, and often enter college right after graduating from high school (Aliabad, Silverman & Stiles, 2009). Students who are commuters, part-time, transfer, and returning students (adult learners) utilize the classroom to receive their sense of community while traditional students often receive this sense of community through student involvement (Aliabad, Silverman & Stiles, 2009). Adult learners often miss out on involvement opportunities due to lack of information and to the limitations of their circumstance (Aliabad, Silverman & Stiles, 2009).

**Environmental Issues**

Most traditional students reside in campus housing and most adult learners do not (Aliabad, Silverman & Stiles, 2009). Professors and school officials do not always recognize that campus programs and services are not as easily accessible to adult learners who commute to campus (Aliabad, Silverman & Stiles, 2009). Institution officials also sometimes assume that the same strategies that work for traditional students will work for nontraditional students (Aliabad, Silverman & Stiles, 2009). A study conducted at College of St. Scholastica demonstrated how the students’ environment plays a factor in success (Burns, 2011). The institution implemented changes in order to better accommodate nontraditional students, and there were positive results (Burns, 2011). There are many times when students who do not share the same environment as traditional students are often overlooked and viewed as being “of the campus” and not “on the campus”. Some of the things essential for successfully obtaining a degree in higher education such as registering for classes,
applying for financial aid, attending classes, required participation in group projects, and faculty or adviser meetings can be overpowering if services and opportunities are only available during certain times of the day (Aliabad, Silverman & Stiles, 2009).

“Commuter, part-time, transfer, and returning students are expected to function in an environment where policies are created and maintained for the traditional population” (Aliabad, Silverman & Stiles, 2009, p. 282). So these students have the odds against them simply due to their environment.

**Commuter Student Issues**

Adult learners are almost always commuter students. The population of commuter students is growing rapidly at universities nationwide (Kim & Rury, 2011). Students who choose not to reside on campus face the challenge of not having their needs met due to their residential situation (Aliabad, Silverman & Stiles, 2009).

Commuter students visit the campus while traditional students live there, and often times there are life situations that affect commuter students in ways that traditional students will not be affected (Aliabad, Silverman & Stiles, 2009). For example, a commuter student would have great difficulty driving to campus to attend class while a traditional student who lives on campus has the ability to simply walk to class. Commuter students and traditional students have different life circumstances and sometimes these differences negatively affect the commuters because the school polices do not account for these differences.
Part-time Student Issues

Many adult learners take classes part-time for a number of reasons that may include family or employment reasons (Aliabad, Silverman & Stiles, 2009). Statistics demonstrate that anywhere from thirty-six to sixty-three percent of students are also employed at some point in their college career in order to cover expenses (Aliabad, Silverman & Stiles, 2009). Adult learners who decide to enroll in school part-time are most likely employed which means that their employment may increase their time in school (Aliabad, Silverman & Stiles, 2009). More time in school negatively affects finances in the long run (Tuckett & Aldridge, 2011).

Transfer Student Issues

Adult learners are often times transfer students. Some may have entered an institution right after high school and had to postpone pursuing their degree. Many relocate for employment or family, which means they would have transferred to a new university. Transfer students have to deal with many issues such as problems with admissions, registration, academic advising, housing, whether on or off campus, as well as difficulties finding involvement opportunities (Aliabad, Silverman & Stiles, 2009).

Returning Student Issues

Adult learners most likely will fall into the category of being a returning student. The problems that returning students deal with are very similar to those who are part-time students (Aliabad, Silverman & Stiles, 2009). Transitioning back to life as a student is often challenging for adult learners bearing in mind that these are students who have not lived life as a student for a great length of time (Aliabad,
Silverman & Stiles, 2009). Times change rapidly, especially in educational settings, and returning students are often behind, making it difficult to adapt.

Multiple Life Role Issues

While the previous issues listed throughout this article are all very important, the issue with having multiple life roles as an adult learner is significant. In addition to being a student, adult learners often also have the responsibility of being a full-time or part-time employee, parents, and caregivers (Aliabad, Silverman & Stiles, 2009). The responsibility of having to take care of someone else weighs heavy on a student no matter if they are single or married.

Is Online Education the Solution to Adult Learner Complications?

There has been an increase in the number of online educational. Online learning is a set of flexible teaching and learning strategies that seeks to provide greater access to learning for all students through the use of technology (University of Western Australia, 2010). Online education eliminates several of the issues adult learners face (Burns, 2011). Online education may be the answer for adult learners because it provides convenience and is easily accessible (Burns, 2011). “The NCES Statistics estimated the number of adult learners over the age of 25 formally enrolled in postsecondary education was 6 million. Of those enrolled, 3,077,000 were enrolled in distance educational courses. The number of online enrollments has roughly double when compared to the 1997 enrollment of 1,632,250” (Burns, 2011). These statistics support the notion that online education is being utilized and is beneficial to this population.
What Else Can Be Done to Help Adult Learners Succeed?

A study done in Malaysia suggests that revised policies and blended coursework better accommodates adult learners (Mohamad, Hussin, & Shaharuddin, 2015). Hybrid courses could serve as a tool for adult learners to be more successful in higher education (Frantzen, 2014). Research demonstrates adult learners and traditional students are both finding great success with hybrid courses due to the nature of these courses (Frantzen, 2014). Technology use within the classroom that pertains to academics has been shown to increase student engagement (Günüş & Kuzu, 2014). Adult learners often have difficulty being engaged in the classroom; therefore, increased technology use many aid in their success (Al-Mashaqbeh, & Al Khawaldeh, 2009). With a few adjustments in higher education, the number of adult learners who are successful will increase.

There is a great deal of literature that discusses the problems with adult learners in higher education, but there is a lack of research that examines the true experience of individuals within this population. Student needs have changed over the course of the years (Burns, 2011), and as educators, we should evolve to accommodate these new student needs. More in depth research on this population will lead to more effective ways to aid in smoother transitions, decrease issues, and help students succeed.
Works Cited


