6

This chapter discusses the challenges, characteristics, and transitional roles of adult learners. Implications for student services professionals are presented.

Adult Learners in Transition

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Adult learners are a rapidly growing segment of the postsecondary student population. While many in student services use the terms *nontraditional* and *adult student* interchangeably, we argue that adult students have particular characteristics that set them apart from nontraditional students. In order to understand who these students are it is necessary to clear up some of the confusion about the difference between adult students and nontraditional students. A century ago, nontraditional students would have been identified by race, gender, or socioeconomic status (Ogren, 2003). More recently, that definition was simplified to nontraditional students being those age twenty-five or older. Today, the definition has expanded. Now nontraditional students are those who have at least one of the following characteristics: they delay postsecondary enrollment one year or more after high school graduation, enroll part time, are employed full time, are financially independent of their parents, have dependents other than a spouse, are single parents, or do not have a high school diploma (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2002), 73 percent of all undergraduates are nontraditional in some way, making them the majority rather than the exception on today's campuses.

Adult students are often referred to as nontraditional students, yet not all nontraditional students are adult students. Despite some overlap between the definition of nontraditional students and adult students (for example, adult students are also age twenty-five years and over), there are characteristics of

adult students that deserve our attention and the recognition that these students are a distinct group. First, adult students are more likely to be pursuing a program leading to a vocational certificate or degree. As a result, many choose to enroll in community colleges. Second, adult students have focused goals for their education, typically to gain or enhance work skills. Many adult students view education as a means of transporting themselves from one phase of life to another (Aslanian, 2001). A third characteristic of adult learners is that they consider themselves primarily workers and not students. With all of the other outside obligations in an adult learner's life, being a student very well may be a lower priority than being a spouse and father or mother, too. A fourth characteristic is that adult students are more likely to be enrolled in distance education. Again, with all of their other responsibilities, adult students are seeking education that can fit into their busy lives; distance education is a means to make that happen. In 2005, NCES found that adult learners also were more likely to speak a language other than English. This fifth factor indicates that adult learners may have an additional hurdle to cross before even enrolling in basic collegiate coursework. And finally, a report published by NCES (2002) found that adult learners are more likely to leave postsecondary education without earning a degree.

Increase of Nontraditional and Adult Student Enrollment

Several factors have led to the increasing number of adult and nontraditional students on our campuses and in our classrooms. According to the 2000 Census, of the 182 million individuals age twenty-five and older, 126 million have not completed an educational degree beyond a high school diploma (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2000). In addition, for many regions of the United States, the numbers of high school graduates will continue to decrease for the foreseeable future, so adult students are a market to be tapped. A second factor is the decline of the blue-collar sector of the economy. Outsourcing and layoffs have forced many adults back into the labor pool only to find they no longer have the necessary skills to become gainfully employed. Thus, more adults are going back to school to increase their work skills or to learn new skills as the new economy is filled with positions that require workers with a more technologically sophisticated skill set. The final factor, the changing norms in society, is perhaps the single most important contributor for the number of adult women who have enrolled in postsecondary education. No longer is it the norm for women to stay in the home and be full-time mothers and housewives—many families would not be able to support that notion economically even if they wanted to. Today, women are the majority population in postsecondary education.

The majority of adult students are led back to higher education due to a major life transition, such as divorce, widowhood, or career change. Each

of these factors constitutes a huge change in an individual's life. Now added to that is the additional transition and pressure of enrolling in postsecondary education.

Current Literature

Research on nontraditional students and adult students often does not differentiate between the two groups of students. Current literature regarding nontraditional students focuses on how best to address the needs of the so-called underserved (Ogren, 2003). Considering the factors listed above, this is not necessarily an accurate portrayal of adult students' needs or what they bring to higher education. This view is based on a deficit model that implies that adult students are not prepared for higher education. Institutions tend to focus on the obstacles adult students face when returning to school (such as finances, family obligations, and time constraints), as they have a direct impact on the one role the institution recognizes for the adult learner, that of student. Some scholars would argue that adult learners are actually more capable of learning than their younger counterparts because of their ability to use their prior experiences in order to process new ideas and situations and that the obstacles faced could actually be seen as strengths for adult learners (Richardson and King, 1998).

Student services professionals need to be cognizant of the tendency to treat adult students as one type of nontraditional students or as a homogeneous group. Along with the factors listed above, adult students tend to be more diverse than their traditional-aged counterparts in their expectations of an institution, their motivation for attending college, and their experiences with higher education (Richardson and King, 1998). Given these insights, coupled with the fact that the numbers of adult learners will continue to increase, student services professionals must adjust to serve this population more effectively. As Aslanian (2001) stated, "Adults in America today—and even more so in the future—cannot stop learning. They will be back, over and over, throughout their lifetimes" (p. 58). Our adult learners will experience transition again and again.

Adult Learning-Focused Institutions

It is worthwhile to examine what some exemplary institutions are doing to serve adult learners. The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) is a nonprofit organization whose mission is to provide institutions of higher education and other stakeholders with "the tools and strategies they need for creating practical, effective lifelong learning solutions" (CAEL, 2005). They have developed a framework and assessment tool for institutions to evaluate effectiveness in serving adult learners. Their initial eight principles of effective service to adult learners are shown in Exhibit 6.1.

Exhibit 6.1. Eight Principles of Effectiveness for
Serving Adult Learners.

• *Outreach.* The institution conducts outreach to adult learners by overcoming barriers of 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 uses 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 both from the curriculum and from 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 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 to 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.

Source: Council for Adult and Experiential Learning, 2005.

Using this framework, CAEL has identified the following six institutions that they consider to exhibit best practices in the area of service to adult students:

Athabasca University in Athabasca, Alberta, Canada (four-year, public)
Empire State College in Saratoga Springs, New York (four-year, public)
Marylhurst University in Marylhurst, Oregon (four-year, private)
School of New Resources at the College of New Rochelle in New Rochelle, New York (four-year, public)
School for New Learning at DePaul University in Chicago, Illinois (four-year, public)
Sinclair Community College in Dayton, Ohio (two-year, public)

Several themes emerge from analyzing the approaches that these institutions take.

Validating Experiential Learning. First, all six of these institutions place a value on experiential learning. Adult learners bring a wealth of life and work experience with them when they enter higher education. All of these institutions offer credit for this experience, either through testing or through a portfolio system. Marylhurst University in Oregon, for example,

uses a portfolio system for students to document their prior learning. The students participate in a learning assessment workshop and work with a prior learning assessment advisor, who helps each student develop a portfolio. The process may be done in either a traditional or online format, and students may be eligible for up to forty-five "quarter credits" for life and work experience (Marylhurst University, 2005).

The School for New Learning at DePaul University observes that the value of recognizing experiential learning is that it validates what students already know and helps the learner to accelerate their program of study: "SNL believes that it matters more what you know than where you've learned that skill. So, we invite you to present evidence of what you already know, so you can use your time in college on 'new learning' rather than repeat what you already know. . . . . Experience is powerful, and . . . . education is most effective if you leave a class able to apply what you learned to a new situation or problem. So we value the experience you have already had and include hands-on activities in classes and projects, encouraging experimentation and risk-taking" (DePaul University, 2005).

Customized Educational Plan. In addition to offering credit for experiential learning, each of these institutions provides some form of a customized educational plan. For example, the School of New Resources at the College of New Rochelle provides a variety of options, such as seminars and independent study, for students to pursue subjects that are relevant to them in ways that are most suitable to them. Students are encouraged to collaborate with faculty to develop alternative independent study opportunities, such as research projects, internships, or telecourses. These forms of study provide new and engaging learning opportunities that are customized to the needs and interests of individual students (College of New Rochelle, 2005).

Sinclair Community College in Dayton, Ohio, has a program called College Without Walls. In this program, each student works with one faculty advisor (called the Core Faculty) to create a learning contract for each course. The learning contract is "a comprehensive guide for achieving course objectives and evaluation of the work." It outlines the objectives of the course, the responsibilities of the student, how the work will be evaluated, and the timeframe in which the student will complete the coursework. The document is signed by the student, the instructor, and the advisor. This approach allows for a flexible time limit for students who need to work at their own pace, on their own time, and from any location, with minimal reliance on technology (Sinclair Community College, 2005).

Support for Distance Learning. All of these institutions provide some form of distance learning. Athabasca University in Alberta, Canada, is an open university specializing primarily in distance learning for adults. Located in a relatively sparsely populated region, the university provides services such as sending library books to students through the mail to overcome geographic barriers. Also, because distance courses can be isolating,

each student in the university is assigned a campus-based tutor whom students may contact as needed for support (Athabasca University, 2005).

The university provides individualized study courses and grouped-study or online courses. Individualized study courses provide students with materials and resources as well as an on-campus tutor whom they may contact as needed. Students are responsible to work through the material at their own pace. Many of the classes provided by Athabasca do not have an enrollment deadline. This is helpful for adult learners, because transitions such as losing a job can happen at any time (Athabasca University, 2005).

Student Support and Student Services. Empire State College in New York is a leader in adult learning and part of the State University of New York (SUNY) system that specializes in educating adults. One way in which the college provides support for students is through its library. The library provides many online resources as well as access to libraries at any SUNY institution. Other online resources, such as an online mathematics library and an online writing resource center, are available to both on-campus and distance students at all hours (Empire State, 2005).

While these online support systems are useful and valuable, it is also essential that students are able to make contact with a tutor, mentor, advisor, or faculty member when they need to talk to a real person. At Empire State College, each student is assigned a faculty mentor who works with the student to develop a tailored degree program that is relevant to the needs of the student and who assists and encourages the student in achieving his or her goals (Empire State, 2005).

An overarching theme for all of these CAEL institutions is flexibility and creativity. Institutions that serve adult students must be willing to be flexible to serve them in perhaps unconventional ways. It is well known that adult students need flexibility in terms of time and location, but they also need flexibility in other ways as well. Flexibility includes allowing adults to work with faculty advisors to customize their program of study according to their goals.

Implications for Student Affairs Professionals

Adult students continually make transitions—from employee to parent to student and back again. Student affairs professionals need to be cognizant of this transitioning and acknowledge and support the larger context of adult learners' lives and the demands placed on them. A goal of education should be to help develop the whole person, not just a single facet of an individual.

If we as student affairs professionals and educators are truly interested in creating a student-centered environment, many factors must be considered. As has been demonstrated, adult learners have many competing interests for their time, attention, and energy, all of which may cause a great deal of stress. However, stress properly funneled can be a positive factor.

Programs that wish to serve adult learners effectively should reconsider traditional practices in order to accommodate these learners. First, they

should reduce the time and effort necessary for adult learners to move through the system. This may include validation of experiential learning from life and work experience.

Second, institutional leaders should review the institution's instructional delivery system to consider whether courses are offered in a variety of formats and whether students have a choice of instructors. Instructors, advisors, and support services must also be accessible when students need them.

Third, coursework should have practical applications. Adults tend to have career-focused goals, and they will often value courses and assignments that are seen as relevant to their goals. For example, instructors could allow projects completed in the workplace to count for credit, or they could make workplace-related assignments.

Fourth, adult students should be encouraged to be more integrated into the social life of the institution. Research shows that the greater the social integration the more likely a student will continue enrollment (Community College Survey of Student Engagement, 2004). Such integration presents a challenge, since adult learners tend to see their support and social networks as being external to the institution; consequently, they are not highly interested in social activities and being involved in the life of the institution. Institutions should seek out creative ways to make these students feel more involved and engaged in the institution.

Fifth, counseling centers should be available to help students cope with emotional, physical, intellectual, cultural, vocational, relational, and other transitions (Haggan, 2000). Such centers should offer programs or workshops on stress in order to help students understand their stress and deal with it appropriately.

Finally, our institutions need to take a proactive approach to uncovering the needs of adult learners, rather than waiting until the traditional exit interview or "autopsy study" to learn about problems (Bean and Metzner, 1985). A proactive approach to serving adult learners requires flexibility, adaptability, and creativity.

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