

Theory-to-Practice

Strategies that Contribute to Nontraditional/Adult Student Development and Persistence

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Abstract

Only a few studies have investigated the retention of degree-seeking nontraditional/adult students on campus, and still fewer programs exist to aid the development and persistence of these students. This paper presents the latest profiles of nontraditional/adult students, as well as the most current research on their persistence and attrition patterns, and then, based on the research, outlines several strategies that could increase their retention.

Introduction

The fastest growing population on college and university campuses across the United States is the nontraditional/adult student population. These students now make up at least 50% of higher education enrollments in colleges and universities. Coupled with these increasing enrollment rates, colleges and universities are now being confronted with the problem of the rising attrition rate among minorities, women, and under-prepared adults. The participation of these students on campus, therefore, has become the focus of a great deal of attention by nontraditional/adult student academics, practitioners, and policy makers, particularly in relation to their retention and persistence in academic degree programs at all levels. This paper has a threefold purpose. First, it will attempt to describe several profiles of the nontraditional/adult student population in higher education. Second, it will present the results of the latest retention research studies surveying nontraditional/adult student populations. Fi-

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nally, it will identify strategies, based on the research, that the author contends could lead to the development and persistence of these students on campus.

Nontraditional Student Profiles

Nontraditional/adult students in higher education cannot be considered a homogeneous group. The linear life course—education, work, retirement—is increasingly rare as people change jobs, retrain voluntarily or involuntarily, and enter the workforce at various times. In addition, the changing workplace—by now a familiar litany of economic, demographic, organizational, and social changes—has created the need to develop life-long learning programs that meet the needs of learners in a kaleidoscope of contexts.

One of the most frequently cited reasons for returning to school is divorce (Glass & Rose, 1994). In 1970 nine out of every ten American families were headed by two parents (Wilson & Nickerman, 1986), but by 1992 more than 30% of families were headed by single parents, 86% of whom were female (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1992). In 1986 almost one-half million single parents were enrolled on campuses in the United States. Of these, 85% were older than 24, 81% were female, 42% were members of minority groups, and 71% had incomes below \$15,000 per year (Apling, 1991). These predominately female students experience both institutional and personal barriers that make their ability to learn and to complete their education more difficult (Glass & Rose, 1994). Institutional barriers may include time limits on obtaining a degree, lack of counseling services, few support groups, and limited childcare service. Personal barriers include financial insufficiency, conflicts between home and school roles, lack of time, insecurity, and problems of identity resulting from divorce (Lieberman & Vaughn, 1990; Marlow, 1989). The average single-mother student has two children, receives little or no child support, is working part-time, or is receiving Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). Although her decision to return to school is a positive one, her life is held together by the threads of available childcare, dependable transportation, and access to health care. Any break in these sources of support threatens her success in the classroom. To add to these dilemmas, recent welfare reform challenges the ability of most single mothers to receive AFDC.

Another trend causing adults to return to campuses in such record numbers is the rapid pace of changes in the workplace. In this era of

organizational restructuring and technological change, adults can no longer plan on spending their entire working lives in one organization. Life is not going to be a linear rise up the ladder to the top. In fact, some analysts proclaim the “new rules of work.” Everyone is self-employed, and the concept of “job” is disappearing (Hall & Mirvis, 1995). Mergers, acquisitions, reengineering, and downsizing are influencing employment patterns and altering the career directions of many. For example, younger workers, otherwise known as Generation X—the 80 million young men and women born between 1961 and 1981—are no longer being advised to think in terms of spending their entire careers in one organization. They must update their skills continually, look ahead to market trends, as well as to the current demands of the workplace, and have a plan for enhancing their performance and long-term employability. On the other hand, mid-life and older workers, including the Baby Boomers—those 70 million individuals born between 1946 and 1964—must deal with all of the above issues and, in addition, such other concerns as skill obsolescence, age discrimination, and lack of experience with current technology. They have to cope with feelings of loss and change, whether their job change is voluntary or involuntary. Johnson (1991) outlines four variables that have an impact on nontraditional/adult student retention that can be applied readily to students from the younger, midlife, and older workforce who are arriving on college and university campuses. These variables include background characteristics (demographic, educational, social, and family history), social/psychological integration (goal commitment, employment goals, interpersonal relationships with student peers and faculty, etc.), academic/institutional integration (grade performance and GPA, program policies, instructors, student support services, scheduling factors, etc.), and, finally, environmentally based factors such as student’s finances, hours of outside employment, family and peer encouragement, peer relationships, and family responsibilities.

One other trend affecting the nontraditional/adult student population is the expansion of life choices for older adults. The phenomenon of early retirement, especially among white males, the recognition that many older adults still want to work, and longer life spans and better health that makes them still able to work necessitates preparing for the *third age*—that period of life beyond the career job and parenting which can last up to 30 years for some. In fact, Marsella and Leong (1995), Davidson and Gilbert (1993), and Kerka (1997) all suggest the importance of applying adult development theory and adult learning theory, as well as developing dif-

ferent approaches for advising different nontraditional/adult students, including older adults.

Needless to say, all of the above phenomena have placed an incredible burden, as well as opportunity, at the doorstep of colleges and universities across the country as they hasten to develop lifelong learning experiences for the plethora of students who are arriving in ever increasing numbers. Not only do degree and non-degree programs need to be developed for these students, but academics, practitioners, and policy makers must take a new and different look at how to attract and retain students from these different demographic sectors.

Research Findings Relevant to Nontraditional/ Adult Student Development and Persistence

In a recent longitudinal study on persistence and degree attainment, findings indicate that nontraditional/adult students are twice as likely (38% versus 16%) as their traditional counterparts to leave school in the first year (National Center for Educational Statistics, 1995). While models of retention applied to higher education most often propose that retention is related to how well students are integrated socially and academically into the institution, research into attrition patterns of nontraditional/adult students indicates that social integration may not play as crucial a role as academic integration. Cleveland-Innes (1994) found academic integration to be a significant variable affecting commitment for the nontraditional student and, when comparing this population to the traditional student population, hypothesized that the effect of academic integration for nontraditional students was much higher, especially since nontraditional students face so many more handicaps as they counteract the difficulties of inadequate role preparation and role overload. Academic integration includes such variables as degree utility, goal commitment and career decision-making self-efficacy, cumulative grade point average, and institutional commitment (Belcheir & Michener, 1997; Cini & Hardin Fritz, 1996; Farabaugh-Dorkins, 1991; Horn & Carroll, 1996; Mercer, 1993; Peterson & delMas, 1996; Sandler, 1998).

Degree utility (how valuable or useful the degree is to the student), goal commitment, and career decision-making self-efficacy have all been found to have a statistically significant effect on the persistence decisions and behaviors of nontraditional/adult students. In other words, the nontraditional/adult student's ability to persist is dependent upon what

Sandler (1998) terms are the student's perceptions of career management—the degree of confidence students express about their competency or ability (self-efficacy) to embark upon educational and occupational information-gathering and goal-planning activities—and is essential to understanding why nontraditional/adult students drop out. Evidence of this phenomenon was also pointed out by Peterson and delMas's (1996) research on nontraditional, under-prepared college students that indicated that degree utility was effective in helping at-risk students bridge the gap between the perceived usefulness of any type of postsecondary education and/or degree and future career choices. These researchers found that nontraditional students who believe college will provide them with opportunities for employment and better careers are more likely to persist.

Another important component included in the importance of academic integration for nontraditional/adult students is the strong link between GPA and intent to persist. Belcheir & Michener (1997), Farabaugh-Dorkins (1991), and Sandler (1998) all indicate GPA to be a good predictor variable for analyzing the retention, attrition, persistence, and re-enrollment trends of nontraditional students. Belcheir & Michener (1997), in their study on the retention of nontraditional, mostly commuter, students, found that the first-term GPA was the most important predictor for returning. Sandler's (1998) study on nontraditional learners enrolled in two-year and four-year degree programs also found academic performance to be a statistically significant predictor for re-enrollment trends when coupled with the intent to persist. He found that cumulative GPA and intent to persist have the strongest influence on the re-enrollment or persistence of nontraditional students. Mercer (1993), in a study of women only, also reported the significant effect GPA had for women who graduated as opposed to those women who dropped out, and evidence for the positive impact on retention of GPA was reported by Farabaugh-Dorkins (1991), who state that the lower the GPA, the more likely a nontraditional student was to drop out.

While academic integration, which is defined as how well a student feels that he or she "fits" into the academic life of an institution, has been defined as an important function of nontraditional/adult student persistence, research also indicates the importance of institutional commitment to this process. Institutional commitment is concerned with the feelings of attachment or belonging that students establish with the institution. Sandler (1998) emphasized the importance of a total system of integrated behaviors and structured sets of reciprocal relationships that exist among

the faculty, the administration, and the student that ultimately enhance the survival rate and/or persistence of the nontraditional student, including career decision-making self-efficacy and academic integration, institutional commitment and goal commitment, and financial attitudes/difficulty and institutional commitment. Cini and Hardin Fritz (1996), who developed a survey for nontraditional students that assesses rewards, costs, investments, alternatives, and commitment to college, also found that students should be informed of any rewards for recognition to their institution, including accreditation status, national rankings, and faculty accomplishments. They report that, if nontraditional/adult students perceive the outcomes (grades, career options, etc.) to represent a fair exchange for time, effort, and money invested, they will be more committed to staying at that particular institution through to degree attainment.

Strategies That Contribute to Nontraditional/ Adult Student Development and Persistence

If nontraditional/adult students who are pursuing degrees are going to develop and prosper on college and university campuses, then the creation of special support programs for these students must be seen as a critical part of the entire lifelong-learning, degree-seeking enterprise. This study suggests that the academic integration of nontraditional/adult students is extremely critical to their success on campus and that the following strategies need to be developed:

Strategy One. Recognize the unique characteristics of the nontraditional/adult student by developing a nontraditional/adult student cultural perspective and nontraditional/adult communities on campus. These communities should then become the *advocates* for nontraditionalism on campus by encouraging shifts in view and perspectives that require flexibility and willingness to change in order to meet the needs of the nontraditional student population base.

Strategy Two. Establish a number of services to meet the variety of needs of nontraditional students. These services should include, but not be limited to, one-stop enrollment, advising and registration opportunities, and financial aid and career counseling developed especially for nontraditional/adult students. These services should also include electronic methods of communicating with students, such as telephone registration and advising appointments, e-mail applications, website postings of time schedules, etc.

Strategy Three. Empower professional student services staff who counsel and advise nontraditional/adult students to be sensitive to the various types of educational backgrounds/needs of their nontraditional/adult students. Advisors and career and personal counselors of nontraditional/adult students need to be trained and aware of the following: the new conditions of work and the impact of constant change and uncertainty in the workplace; family systems theory and the relationship among family, work, and academic responsibilities; adult development theory and adult learning theory; different approaches for different client groups—dual career couples, older adults, women, ethnic groups, etc.; and selection and use of appropriate career assessment instruments.

Strategy Four. Employ, for the purposes of recruiting and pre-enrollment counseling, professional student services staff who possess strong motivational and advising skills in order to help nontraditional/adult students set realistic student expectations and establish a sense of university/college nontraditional community for prospective students.

Strategy Five. Develop orientation and first-year-experience workshops and courses for nontraditional/adult students that empower students to manage the culture of higher education, to deal with the many issues that cause anxiety about returning to school, and to develop learning skills and academic success strategies.

Strategy Six. Design career counseling and development experiences specifically directed to the higher-ordered needs of nontraditional/adult students and include internship, service learning, and volunteer experiences as part of the focus. Placement services/opportunities ought to be developed for these students as well.

Strategy Seven. Encourage faculty members who teach in nontraditional/adult student settings to develop *inclusive* learning environments that attend to this unique population. Methods that affect *inclusiveness* include surveying the nontraditional students in the classroom in order to develop learning activities and curricula that reflect the diversity of the group and developing a new pedagogical style that incorporates and/or draws upon the inclusive experience. Inclusiveness can be accomplished by emphasizing the following three steps: First, establish student/teacher interaction that reinforces the intercommunication among students. This “linking” process then facilitates the sharing of common life experiences pertinent to course material. Second, present course information in a contextual manner that allows for lessons to refer to the relationship between the learner and his or her knowledge base. This context includes

issues relating to the following four domains: family, career, community, and environment. Recognizing that learning can be a transformative process is the third step and can be accomplished by emphasizing in the classroom such diverse practices as reflective journal writing, storytelling, role-playing, small group discussion, and metaphor analysis.

Conclusion

As the emergence of nontraditional/adult learners as a major constituency on campus continues, academics, practitioners, and policy makers working with these populations need to recognize their unique characteristics. Not only must leaders on campus develop new degree and non-degree programs for these students, they must also recognize that retention efforts with these students require vision and creativity to guide efforts, programs to control the conditions that encourage development and persistence, the establishment of student support systems that foster nontraditionalism, the offering of high quality instruction, and flexible structures and processes to help motivate and sustain nontraditional/adult student commitment.

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