Contextualizing the Perceived Barriers of Adult Learners in an Accelerated Undergraduate Degree Program

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Research has consistently suggested that colleges and universities should review academic programs and support services in order to make modifications to meet the needs of adult learners. However, one could argue that colleges and universities cannot be successful in meeting adult learners' needs without understanding the barriers they experience. This study utilized phenomenology to examine the perceived barriers of adult learners in an accelerated undergraduate degree program in the mid-South. Analysis of data collected from adult learners identified three types of barriers: (a). intrapersonal, (b). career and job-related barriers, and (c). academic-related. The results of this study suggested that barriers are never extinct for adult learners and they must work to overcome or manage barriers which emerge from their multiple life roles. Key Words: Adult Learners, Higher Education, Distance Education, Barriers to Learning, Phenomenological Research.

It has been documented that the number of adult learners in higher education continues to increase. There have been greater efforts to provide academic degree programs and support services for the adult learners who are now entering higher education. Providing appropriate programs and services for adult learners remains a challenge for many higher education institutions, and the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (Flint, 2000) has explicitly stated that "without good models of effective practice for serving adult learners, colleges and universities will continue to struggle" (p. 4). Consequently, it seems that the needs of adult learners in higher education are as complex as the challenges that institutions have in meeting their needs. This is due in part to the structures that have defined American higher education. The complicated situation created by the current structure of higher education and needs of adult learners is perhaps best explained as follows:

> Increasing adult attainment of the baccalaureate degree will produce the highest individual and social returns; however, this goal clashes with the structures in place to support it. Millions of adult students are seeking degrees in a system built largely for—and around—traditional students. (Pusser et al., 2007, p. 3)

Likewise, efforts to address the needs of adult learners in higher education are perhaps further exasperated for college and university faculty, administrators and staff because adult learners "are in a different place in life and view the world and their future differently" (Kasworm, 2003a, p. 9).

There has been an increased attention placed on adult learners in higher education in both research circles and by education related organizations. Some education related

organizations have focused on policy issues related to adult learners in higher education and have made recommendations to higher education institutions regarding academic degree programs and support services. For example, the Southern Regional Education Board's Adult Learning Campaign has recommended that its member states invest wisely in adult learning in order to promote prosperity for both the individual and their community (Southern Regional Education Board, 2005). The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning has also developed its Adult Learning Focused Institution initiative in order to "help colleges and universities improve educational opportunities for working adults" (Flint, 2000, p. 2).

Fairchild (2003) and Flint (2000) have argued that many colleges and universities remain challenged with attempts to provide services for adult learners. However, it could be argued that institutions are now more aware of the challenges that adult learners face upon enrollment. Yet research and accepted practices regarding adult learners in higher education has suggested that institutional response to the needs of adult learners are "neither generally systematic nor empirically based" or fail to address "diverse identities, characteristics, and needs" (Pusser et al., 2007, p. 7). The general characteristics of adult learners in higher education contribute to the challenge of meeting their needs through institutional programs and initiatives. Adult learners are vulnerable in higher education due in part to the difficulty of transitioning to college. Their vulnerability is heightened due to their lack of educational experiences and responsibilities away from the institution (O'Donnell & Tobbell, 2007). However, as Giancola, Grawitch, and Borchert (2009) stated, it is the responsibility of higher education institutions to assist adult learners' transition to the college environment. Finally, accelerated degree programs have become more popular among colleges and universities in order to meet the needs of adult learners and have been described as a "new mental model of learning, grounded in adult maturity and responsible engagement in the world beyond the classroom" (Kasworm, 2003b, p. 27). One could argue that awareness of the needs of adult learners has prompted colleges and universities to design and implement accelerated degree programs.

Focus of the Study

Research to date has focused on barriers and challenges (Kasworm, 2008; Mercer, 1993; Richter & Witten, 1984), as well as persistence (Bradley & Graham, 2000; MacKinnon-Slaney, 1994; Brown, 2002), related to adult learners in higher education. However, research efforts have yet to explicitly explain the meaning of the barriers as they are perceived by the adult learner or how those barriers are manifested in the life of the adult learner. Lack of an explicit understanding of the barriers of adult learners begs the question as to whether or not colleges and universities can adequately meet their needs through academic degree programs or appropriate support services. Therefore, the goal of this study was to move beyond the identification and classification of the barriers that adult learners encountered related to their enrollment in an accelerated undergraduate degree program. This study sought to gather greater insight and develop a contextualization of the meaning of those barriers among adult learners.

The results of this study are of interest to college and university faculty, staff, and administrators who are responsible for the development and implementation of academic degree programs and support services for adult learners. The results of this study can

assist college and university personnel in developing programs and initiatives that assist adult learners in becoming successful in college or that identify and reduce or remove those barriers that can be controlled by the institution. The results of this study can assist college and university faculty, staff, and administrators who are responsible for the development and implementation of academic degree programs and support services for adult learners as it would enable higher education personnel to go beyond simply labeling the barriers that adult learners experience. An understanding of the context of the barriers and how those barriers are manifested within the life of the adult learner provides more insight which could improve the method by which colleges and universities approach planning degree programs and offering support services.

The research setting of this study was an online degree program at a mid-South research university and the participants were geographically dispersed. Likewise the study included juniors and seniors, who were transfer students, and who had at least five years of work experience. Colleges and universities that offer different types of academic degree programs for adult learners could likely observe different example of barriers among their adult learners.

Qualitative Inquiry Approach

A significant amount of the research regarding adult learners in higher education has employed quantitative methodologies, especially the seminal works that inform practice. Giancola et al. (2009) called for more qualitative research in order to understand the impact of personal, school, and work stressors on adult learners in higher education. In keeping with that recommendation, this study utilized qualitative inquiry in order to collect and analyze data regarding adult learners' perceptions of the barriers they experienced while enrolled in the accelerated undergraduate degree program.

The qualitative tradition applied to this study was phenomenological research, meaning the lived experience of the adult learners involved in this study. Rossman and Rallis (2003) explained that "those engaged in phenomenological research focus in depth on the meaning of a particular aspect of experience, assuming that through dialogue and reflection, the quintessential meaning of the experience will be revealed" (p. 97). Furthermore, Merriam (1989) described how qualitative research questions are "framed to seek understanding and meaning in the data" (p. 166) and how receptivity to qualitative research among adult educators could lead to better understanding regarding practices in the field. The researcher felt that phenomenological research was appropriate in order to gather data from adult learners that were both adequate and contextually rich in order to better understand how they perceived the barriers they encountered related to their enrollment in an accelerated undergraduate degree program.

Literature Review

There is significant published literature regarding adult learners in higher education. Published works have provided higher education faculty, administrators, and staff with key insights regarding this growing population in higher education. These works have provided an understanding of the characteristics of adult learners, explained how they differ from traditional-age students, recommended how academic programs

such as accelerated degree programs should be structured, and finally discussed what motivates adult learners to persist.

The Adult Learner in Higher Education

Choy (2002) indicated that 73% of undergraduate students have one or more nontraditional characteristic and it has been stated that the traditional undergraduate has become "the exception rather than the rule" (p. 25). The nontraditional characteristics of today's adult learner in higher education include delayed enrollment, part-time attendance, financial independence, full-time employment, having dependents other than a spouse, being a single parent, and not obtaining a standard high school diploma. Unlike traditional-aged college students, adult learners are not homogenous and vary in regards to career experiences, family life, and education background (O'Donnell & Tobbell, 2007). This group within the American higher education possesses a unique set of needs, especially if they are employed while pursuing higher education (Flint, 2000). Recent research from the Lumina Foundation for Education indicated some unique characteristics regarding adult learners in higher education based upon research conducted through its Emerging Pathways project. Four essential "lessons" emerged from those research efforts regarding today's adult learner in higher education: (a). there is no "typical" adult learner, (b). a key area of adult learning (e.g., site-based, online, short-term, and non-credit classes) is poorly understood, (c). the well-worn path will not work for most adult learners, and (d). to find the right path, adult learners need a guide(Pusser et al., 2007, p. 4).

Traditional-Age vs. Adult Learners in Higher Education

The adult learner in American higher education faces challenges different than their traditional-age counterparts and are more likely to not finish courses or their programs of study (Pusser et al., 2007). Terrell (1990) identified seven developmental needs of adult learners based upon what had been discussed in the literature. The needs identified by Terrell included: (a). low self-concept; threatened by the classroom but goal-oriented, (b). time, energy, and emotional demands, (c). establishing financial stability, (d). work and civic demands, (e). developing family relationships and caring for family, (f). questioning career choices, and (g). reappraise habits and interests (Terrell, 1990, pp. 244-246).

While adult learners and traditional-aged college students have similar patterns of motivation, research has found no significant difference regarding their performance in courses based upon the variables of age and gender. However, adult learners may employ different learning strategies than their traditional-aged peers especially in how they respond to course test questions. Likewise, adult learners may be less confident about their abilities and could benefit from help in assessing their cognitive and management abilities (Justice & Dornan, 2001). Wolfgang and Dowling (1981) compared motivation among adult and younger undergraduates through a quantitative study which utilized random stratified sampling. They found that adult students possessed higher cognitive interests as a motivational factor and lower social relationships and external expectations as motivational factors. Another quantitative study by Morstain and Smart (1977)

identified five typologies of adult learners in higher education which affects how adult learners approach the learning process among adult students enrolled part-time in a college degree program who took evening courses. The five typologies include non-directed learners, social learners, stimulation-seeking learners, career-oriented learners, and life change learners.

Accelerated Degree Programs for Adult Learners

The results of a qualitative study by Kasworm (2003b) indicated four components which attracted adult learners to an accelerated degree program. Those four components and a definition of each as provided by Kasworm included:

- Structure: the supportive learning world of the program.
- Relationships: the quasi-family relationships with fellow student learners.
- Student Identity: the beliefs of a specific student identity for effective learning and successful completion.
- Adult beliefs regarding learning: paradoxical beliefs regarding engagement in accelerated learning. (Kasworm, 2003b, p. 18)

Challenge and Persistence Among Adult Learners

Giancola, Munz, and Trares (2008) surveyed adult students in St. Louis University's School of Professional Studies utilizing the Noel Levitz Adult Student Priorities Survey and concluded that "adult students experience their own apprehension as they return to school and worry that they do not have the skills, time, and information necessary to succeed" (p. 225). MacKinnon-Slaney (1994) presented a theoretical model for encouraging persistence among adult learners in higher education. This three-component model included addressing needs related to personal issues, learning issues, and environmental issues. The model was designed to serve as a heuristic tool for counselors working with adult learners in higher education. MacKinnon-Slaney identified two areas where the model could be applied to assist adult learners including attending to developmental issues and learning basic survival skills necessary to survive higher education. In a related work, Kasworm (2008) stated that "learning is an act of hope" (p. 27) and identified four key emotional challenges adult learners face in higher education which contribute to the development of their identity as a student. These four challenges included seeking entry to college, ongoing engagement in the learning environment, engagement in learning new knowledge as well as new perspectives and beliefs, and finally gaining a place, position, voice, and related sense of value in the higher education environment.

A number of researchers have suggested strategies for assisting adult learners persist in college and overcome the barriers and challenges associated with their enrollment. Brown (2002) stated that efforts to assist adult learners in being successful should not only include new degree and non-degree options, but also vision and creativity, encouragement of development and persistence, implementation of services to promote "non-traditionalism," high quality instruction, and finally flexibility in structures

and procedures. Mercer (1993) who researched nontraditional undergraduate women utilizing a quantitative comparative analysis suggested that colleges and universities offer workshops to assist students in coping with the stresses associated with college. Bradley and Graham (2000) identified strategies that could assist adult learners in being successful in college. Those strategies included focusing on learning activities, utilizing their existing knowledge base, looking for methods to make direct connections of content to real life experiences, and using class time for interaction with faculty and peers.

Theoretical Framework

The barriers to adult learning that Cross (1981) identified in her seminal work, *Adults as learners: Increasing participation and facilitating learning,* were adopted as the framework for this study. Cross identifies three types of barriers for adults wishing to engage in learning including institutional, situational, and dispositional. Cross also provided the following definition for each type of barrier:

- Institutional: barriers that are a result of the "practices and procedures that exclude or discourage working adults from participating in educational activities such as inconvenient schedules or locations, full-time fees for part-time study, inappropriate courses of study, and so forth" (p. 98).
- Situational: barriers "arising from one's situation in life at a given time such as job and home responsibilities" (p. 98).
- Dispositional: barriers "related to attitudes and self-perceptions about oneself as a learner" (p. 98).

The theoretical framework provided both a working definition of the various types of barriers and also guided the researcher through the interview process in order to ask questions of adult learners related to each type of possible barrier.

Methodology

Selection of Research Subjects

Adult learners enrolled in an online course that was required for the accelerated undergraduate degree program were invited to participate in this study. The course was *Professional Development Strategies* and data were collected from students enrolled in the course over two consecutive semesters (fall and spring). A total of 21 adult learners participated in the study from both semesters. The instructor, who is also the researcher, received institutional review board (IRB) approval prior to collecting data. Students were informed that participation in the study was optional and would not affect their grade or standing in the course or the accelerated undergraduate degree program. The *Professional Development Strategies* course was selected for this study because it was a required course in the accelerated degree program during the adult learners' senior year. Collection of data during the course also provided an opportunity for students to reflect

upon their experiences in college with a special emphasis on the barriers they encountered.

The institution where this study was conducted was a research university in the mid-South. The research university offered the accelerated undergraduate degree program to working adults via distance education. Only the last two years (junior and senior) of coursework were offered by the research university and adult learners enrolled in the program completed a general education coursework prior to matriculation in the accelerated undergraduate degree program.

Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

The course instructor developed a series of questions regarding the students' experiences as adult learners in the accelerated undergraduate degree program. The series of questions guided the online text-based interview process. Interviews began with a grand tour question focusing on the adult learners' overall experience in higher education. Questions then followed regarding the type of barriers (i.e., institutional, situational, and dispositional) and the management of those barriers. Adult learners were asked to describe specific incidents in order to properly contextualize and bring meaning to the barriers they experienced. Questions were guided by the "Principles of Effectiveness for Serving Adults" as identified by Flint (2000).

Given that students were enrolled in an online program, the decision was made to collect data through the online course management system which was used to deliver the degree program to the students. This decision was based upon the fact that trust and rapport had been developed with the adult learners (Anderson & Kanuka, 2003; Rezabek, 2000) and is validated by the use of new data sources which are emerging in the field (Creswell, 2007). Adult learners were asked to respond to the series of questions posed by the course instructor and the instructor interjected follow-up questions as necessary to elicit more in-depth responses from the adult learners. The text-based survey feature of the online course management system was utilized to collect adult learners' responses and students could not see or respond to the responses offered by their peers. Data were collected one month prior to the end of the course for both the fall and spring semesters.

The course instructor and researcher conducted all data collection through facilitation of the interview questions via the text-based survey feature within the online course management system. The decision was made to collect data in this method given that students were enrolled in an online course and were geographically dispersed. Data saturation was achieved at the end of the interview process when the researcher observed that multiple adult learners had provided explicit examples of the types of barriers they had encountered. Multiple themes comprised the categories of barriers experienced by adult learners. Following the data collection process, responses were downloaded without identifying information about the students (e.g. username, student ID number). Responses from the adult learners were uploaded to a qualitative data analysis program, NVivo (QSR International, 2006). The transcripts of student responses were reviewed and open coding was utilized to code the transcripts. The researcher then utilized the *categorizing strategies* to sort the codes into themes (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). The theoretical framework, Cross (1981) three types of barriers for adults wishing to engage in learning, guided the data analysis and reduction process.

The triangulation method utilized in this study was analyst triangulation and utilized additional analysts to review findings (Patton, 2002). Two colleagues with experience in higher education as faculty members and as academic advisors who had extensive experience working with adult learners in higher education assisted the researcher by reviewing the transcripts and confirming the results of the analysis. Input from these colleagues confirmed the results of the preliminary analysis conducted by the researcher. These colleagues also suggested that the researcher look at what has labeled the "convergence of barriers" among adult learners. This topic is discussed along with the other results.

Results

Barriers Perceived by Adult Learners

Three primary types of barriers perceived by adult learners enrolled in the accelerated undergraduate degree program included: (a). intrapersonal barriers, (b). career and job-related barriers, and (c). academic-related barriers. Following are descriptions of the types of barriers along with themes and examples of each. The examples are provided in order to explain the context of the barriers as perceived by the adult learners in the accelerated undergraduate degree program.

Intrapersonal barriers. Several themes were included in the category, intrapersonal barriers. The most common intrapersonal barrier among students was *time management* which was discussed by a total of six students. Other intrapersonal barriers included *money management* (three students), *balance of family responsibilities* (two students), *handling of physical and emotion matters* (two students), and *fear of failure* (one student).

Perhaps one student best exemplified the toll that intrapersonal barriers play on working adults who are pursuing a college degree. That student said, "MONEY & TIME!! It's hard to do your best when there is a financial and time strain on you!" One student saw barriers as an intrinsic issue and stated, "The barriers lie within me." Finally, another student disclosed how the barrier can affect their ability to function when they stated, "the fear of failing overwhelms me from time to time."

Career and job-related barriers. Students identified two barriers that were grouped into the category, career and job-related barriers. These barriers included *meeting job expectations* which three students discussed and *lack of support from workplace while pursuing education* which one student discussed. When reflecting on the influence of career and job-related barriers and the need for balance, one student stated, "Often times I allow myself to become consumed in my job so much so that I get behind in the course work."

Academic-related barriers. A total of six themes comprised the "Academic-Related" barriers category. These themes all spoke to how perceived barriers among students related to success in college. The two most common themes in this category were *understanding and utilizing technology* (three students) and *lack of face to face*

interaction with faculty and peers (three students). Other themes in this area included *balancing academic course loads* (two students), *meeting the general expectations as a student* (one student), *lack of instructor feedback* (one student), and finally *coping with a learning disability* (one student).

Two themes, *understanding and utilizing technology* and *lack of face to face interaction with faculty and peers*, are related in that students' frustration with the technology used to deliver the accelerated undergraduate degree program. One student said they were afraid they might "misread something and fail to perform my assignments and get them posted properly," when referring to the barriers associated with the use of technology. While another student said they missed not having a teacher "standing up in front of the class" and another said they missed "not having a teacher right there at my disposal for questions." Finally, one student who said they were coping with a learning disability stated that they thought having dyslexia would be a "limitation" while enrolled in the program which was offered via the Internet.

Methods to Overcome Learning Barriers by Adult Learners

The most common method to overcome barriers as discussed by students with this study was *utilizing organization and time management strategies* which three students discussed. Other methods discussed by students included *seeking out family support* (two students), *regularly communicating with faculty* (two students), and *being persistent* (two students). Finally some students discussed the advantages of *seeking out a knowledgeable person, relying on their internal drive,* and *taking time to relax and refocus* as methods to overcome barriers. The realities of managing the various areas of their lives and the need to find both balance and set limits is perhaps best expressed by the following student:

> It has been quite a challenge to balance family, work and classes. I have definitely learned how many classes is enough and when to stop. It is hard to get on a schedule when there is not a set time to have a class. Therefore I had to set a schedule for myself and continue to work on that in the future. (Student A)

Convergence of Barriers from Multiple Life Roles

Although there were distinct areas in which barriers existed for the adult learners, there was also evidence to suggest that the barriers were inter-related and transcended the different areas of life. Responses such as the one below allude to how barriers are a constant issue for adult learners as they attempt to manage the different roles and responsibilities of their life. One student stated:

> The most difficult barrier to learning is time. Most adult students work forty hours a week, have a family, and job. In my job, I have to constantly be in a state of learning to keep up. After work, I rush home to spend a few minutes with my family before sitting down to do my schoolwork. It is hard physically and emotionally to keep going, but well worth it. (Student B)

Discussion

The accounts of the experiences of the students who participated in this study suggested that barriers consistently affected the enrollment experience for adult learners in this accelerated undergraduate degree program. Adult learners in this study alluded to how they overcame one barrier or set of barriers in order to enroll in the degree program, only to be presented with new barriers as a student. Nonetheless, barriers are never extinct for adult learners and they must work to consistently overcome or manage barriers which emerge from their multiple life roles.

The results of this study expanded the explanation of barriers that are perceived by adult learners by providing a deeper contextual description of the barriers presented by Cross (1981). The results of this study could be categorized using Cross' barriers in the following manner (see table 1).

Table 1. *Expanded Explanation of Barriers Perceived by Adult Learners*

Cross' (1981) Category	Barrier Identified in Current Study
Institutional	Academic-related barriers
Situational	Career and job-related barriers
Dispositional	Intrapersonal barriers

It merits comment that the barriers identified in this study provided an updated paradigm and provided greater insight into the categories of barriers identified by Cross (1981). However, the claim cannot be made that these barriers should replace Cross' categorization of barriers for adult learners. The accounts of barriers experienced by adult learners as recorded in this study show no change in what constitutes a situational or dispositional barrier over the past 30 years. However, the adults who participated in this study provided an updated account of what constituted an institutional barrier.

It could be argued that colleges and universities have removed some of the institutional barriers which Cross (1981) defined as "practices and procedures that exclude or discourage working adults from participating in educational activities such as inconvenient schedules or locations, full-time fees for part-time study, inappropriate courses of study" (p. 98). However, the results of this study suggested that new types of institutional barriers now exist for the adult learner. Specifically, the academic-related barriers indentified in this study are indicative of the technology utilized to deliver the accelerated undergraduate degree program. Technology also presents other barriers which permeate the enrollment experience for adult learners given that most academic and student support systems have a technological interface especially for students enrolled in distance education programs.

The barriers identified in this study are examples derived from in-depth interviews of adult learners who were in their last year of an accelerated undergraduate degree program at a mid-South research university. The results of this study only mark the beginning of efforts to identify and understand barriers for today's adult learner in higher education. The qualitative methodologies utilized in this study provided rich contextual descriptions of how adult learners themselves perceive those barriers. It is expected that additional research in this area would produce additional examples of

barriers for today's adult learner in higher education. The results are transferrable to similar settings and different types of barriers would likely be observed in academic degree programs for adult learners at different types of institutions or which served a different group of adult learners.

Conclusions

As previously noted, Fairchild (2003) and Flint (2000) stated that many colleges and universities are challenged with the task of providing services for adult learners. This almost seems unthinkable given the decades of research that has been conducted regarding this unique, yet steadily growing, segment of the population in today's colleges and universities. However, one cannot negate the value of the previous research which has identified, described, and predicted enrollment patterns of adult learners in higher education. American higher education has just recently arrived at a point where student recruitment and retention models require modification in order to account for the needs of adult learners. Recent research has suggested that a one-size-fits-all approach, specifically models developed for work with traditional-age college students, will not suffice in order to meet the needs of today's adult learner. The student recruitment and retention models that are being vetted today for use with adult learners must be flexible enough to accommodate the needs of the myriad of adult learners who are entering higher education.

Higher education faculty, administrators, staff, as well as policy makers should carefully consider the complexity of barriers that adult learners face when making decisions that could impact access and degree completion by adult learners in higher education. This consideration must examine degree programs, course offerings, delivery formats, as well as support systems. Efforts should be made to modify existing support systems or create new support services which appropriately address needs for adult learners. However, modification or creation of these systems will be futile unless higher education faculty, administrators, staff, as well as policy makers possess some understanding of the barriers that adult learners face in higher education. Colleges and universities must work with adult learners in order to better understand the context of those barriers.

The task of assisting adult learners in meeting challenges related to enrollment in higher education can be daunting. However, faculty, administrators, and staff at colleges and universities should exercise control over the barriers upon which they are able. Efforts should exist at the course, academic program, academic department, and institution levels to identify and eradicate unnecessary barriers to participation in learning by adults. If barriers cannot be eradicated, then colleges and universities must continue their efforts to assist adult learners in navigating these barriers through development and implementation of appropriate support systems. Support systems must acknowledge and address adult learners' need for balance and fear of failure. Support systems must account for the needs of students who take courses in non-traditional formats such as online, off-campus, evenings, or on weekends. Perpetuation of the traditional practices which were built within a structure to serve the needs of traditional-age students will only stand to contribute to the barriers that adult learners encounter in higher education.

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