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Identifying and Addressing the Needs of Adult Students in Higher Education

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As the number of adult students enrolled within higher education programs increases, educational institutions must respond by addressing their needs on a continual basis. Adult learners possess a wide variety of characteristics which are not common to a traditional student, including personal life barriers, financial responsibilities and different learning styles. This article identifies some of these characteristics, and discusses ways for administrators and educators within higher education to address them in order to cultivate a positive learning experience for the adult student.

Adults have become an integral part of the total enrolment composition within higher education institutions (US Department of Education 2003) for a multitude of reasons. In the past, many chose

to return to school for the sole purpose of advancing their degree, and the focus of climbing the 'corporate ladder' meant dedication to an organisation for a long timeframe within one's career, eventually working up to management levels or above.

The consequences of a poor job market have forced today's workers to look for new ways of remaining marketable and competitive. People are not staying with one company for the majority of their careers, and the opportunities to work up to management levels within a traditional organisation are not as common any longer as in the past. In addition, adults must rely on dual incomes to support a family, and the traditional family unit of the past does not generally exist.

As a result of these changes in the job market and corporate structure, many adults are choosing to return to school to obtain advanced degrees, and this choice has become a vitally important step for those who would like to advance in or change their careers. Not only does a college degree allow one to remain competitive in the job market, it also provides a foundation on which to build a career that allows opportunity to transition their careers into other fields, rather than remaining 'stuck' in one career path all of their lives. With increasing enrolments of adult students, it is important for educators and institutions of higher education to understand common motivators which cause adult students to choose to return to formal education, and the subsequent barriers they face when returning to the classroom. This article will discuss these motivators and barriers, and suggest techniques to overcome them for administrators and instructors.

As stated, corporate downsizing and a poor job markets have forced individuals to re-examine their careers, and focus on new ways to remain competitive in the workplace. Corporate cost-cutting initiatives often require many to take on multiple roles and function in a variety of capacities, often outside of normal roles and responsibilities within the organisation. Organisations have also

slimmed and de-layered, thus removing structures that supported the traditional career (Mallon & Cohen 2001); therefore, the linear career path that once kept people working in the same job, often for the same company, is no longer the standard career route for today's workers.

While the initial experiences of corporate downsizing forces many to become extremely stressed and burnt-out on the job, downsizing has not been all negative. Many people report that they are far happier in their new jobs, working for themselves, going back to formal education, or simply retiring (Nadler 1998). Many workers are also pursuing varied career paths that reflect sequential career changes, and this set of ongoing changes in career plans, direction and employers portrays the lifetime progression of work as a composite of experiences (Brown 2000). Today's workers must be entrepreneurial and function as free agents, marketing themselves and the skills they can offer to employers who serve as their 'customers' (Brown 1998).

With the current movement towards downsizing or 'rightsizing' by both large and small employers, many adults have experienced the need to re-evaluate their careers (either voluntarily or by being forced) and as a result of that re-evaluation, pursue some form of education. In addition, an adult experiencing an unexpected mid-life career transition may find many opportunities to move into an educational situation that will eventually lead to a new job or career. This work-to-school transition may be a self-induced transition, or it may be one forced by a change in the economy (Boulmetis 1997).

There is also an on-going, steady increase in individuals finding themselves in transitional career situations, resulting in more adults returning to formal education, with work-related courses and personal interest courses being the most popular forms of adult education in 2001. In an age of rapid economic and technological change, continued learning can provide benefits for individuals and for society as a whole (US Department of Education 2003). Due

to this boom in non-traditional students, adults now constitute the majority of students in higher education, and what drives them, what they bring to, want and need from universities are important questions for research and in the development of a more responsive system of higher education. In turn, those working in higher education need a fuller understanding of the impact of education on learners' motivation and sense of identity (West 1995), as well as the barriers which separate adult learners from traditional students. Educational institutions must respond to these needs as effectively as possible in order to remain competitive and accessible to non-traditional adult learners.

First, it is important to define non-traditional students, a definition which changes from campus to campus. Non-traditional students are generally thought to be over twenty-five years of age and pursuing a baccalaureate degree, but in a world of change, continuing education is the imperative of both college graduate and non-graduate (Burkett 1968). In addition to corporate downsizing and transitioning of a career, there may be other reasons for students returning to education, including a decision to return to study once children are older, a divorce situation requiring the need for new training and education, or an opportunity to finish an interrupted degree (Wynman 1988). Continued employment of non-traditional students is tied to lifelong learning and ongoing skill development, practices which enhance career growth and the potential for career advancement and mobility. This trend toward career independence is reflected in the new breed of independent contractors and temporary workers who move from job to job and project to project, marketing themselves for temporary assignments in a variety of organisations rather than seeking permanent jobs (Brown 1998).

In a transition to career independence, some individuals move into self-employment. The decision to become self-employed is a choice of independence and autonomy over dependence and the rules of the

organisational world (Mallon & Cohen 2001). Regardless of whether or not someone chooses to work for an organisation, create a project-based career or become self-employed, individuals will continue to seek educational opportunities which will allow them to remain marketable and competitive in today's economy.

Educational opportunities within continuing education include formal classroom instruction, workplace seminars or workshops, and professional association conferences (Borgen 1995), and adults need ready access to these types of opportunities in order to fulfill their desire continually to learn. A large part of an educational institution's responsibility is to provide these types of opportunities, while being sensitive to the barriers faced by non-traditional students.

Most non-traditional students are familiar with the delicate balance among family responsibilities, work schedules and academic calendars (Compton & Schock 2000). However, there are other issues encountered by non-traditional students when returning to the classroom environment. One of the most apparent problems includes the overall discomfort of older students (Bishop-Clark 1992). To overcome this discomfort or uncertainty, educational institutions should put the student at ease, before they step foot into the classroom, by implementing some of the following resources:

- accessible registration procedures, which allow for simple course registration. This includes providing any on-site counsellors at designated times in the evening or weekends prior to the start of the semester to assist with enrolment issues
- on-going tutorials on how to use the institution website. Now, more than ever, students are required to use the school portal to access grades, enrol, and pay bills. This can be intimidating to individuals who are not familiar with the use of the Internet
- campus tours, orientation of the student to the library, cafeterias, parking procedures and the campus bookstore

All of these resources will aid the student during the first several weeks prior to the start of the semester, and allow them to feel more comfortable when they step foot into the classroom on their first day.

Once in the classroom, the adult student faces several barriers that the typical undergraduate might not face, including (Bishop-Clark 1992):

- discomfort of older students
- different orientations towards the professors
- different learning styles
- hostility between age groups

It is the responsibility of the course instructor to attempt to implement course teaching methods and facilitation strategies to help overcome these barriers. This includes encouraging personal contact, discussing differences during class, increasing awareness of similarities and allowing time for students to get to know one another (Bishop-Clark 1992).

There are a variety of expectations among non-traditional students who are returning to an academic environment. While many individuals can take advantage of job training, specialty classes or continuing education credit, others are looking for specific college courses or degrees (Compton & Schock 2000). In addition, higher education is not the central feature of their lives, but just one of a multiplicity of activities in which they are engaged every day. The relationships these students want with their college is like the one they already have with their banks, supermarkets and the other organisations they patronise (Levine 1993).

In response to these academic issues, programs must be designed to address these issues, while also meeting the expectations of the students. There are numerous ways in which educational institutions can address these prevalent barriers and student expectations.

Institutions are faced with increasing numbers of non-traditional students who often have difficulty taking classes during regularly scheduled times (Daniel 2000); therefore, institutions must be creative with scheduling by offering coursework during evenings and weekends, or extending or shortening academic semesters to be more conducive to the students' schedules. Intensive or time-shortened courses taught outside the traditional semester are becoming common at many colleges and universities due to the increasing number of non-traditional students (Daniel 2000).

Educational institutions must also be prepared to provide course offerings through a variety of means, rather than relying on the traditional classroom environment. Several types of non-traditional education programs include (Vangen 1998):

- independent learning, allowing students to work completely free of the classroom setting at their own pace
- open learning, which combines the benefits of independent learning with opportunities for group discussion
- contract programs, that merge the needs of businesses to train employees with a college's teleconferencing capabilities
- satellite classrooms, which lease off-site classroom space to provide educational facilities to students outside the general radius of the college
- distance-learning centres, that allow students to work from course plans through the use of the Internet and to access class curriculum from anywhere

Non-traditional students, particularly those who have been away from the classroom for a significant period of time, may find the library to be intimidating, particularly for those students unfamiliar with technological advances within the library system. Capitalising on non-traditional students' strengths and helping to support and re-acquaint them with the library is part of the task facing the academic librarian. Some of the following suggestions may provide starting

points for working more specifically with non-traditional students in the academic library (Wynman 1988):

- assigning staff members to work specifically with non-traditional students
- establishing a recognisable core of librarians available to give assistance
- taking a step-by-step, concrete approach when explaining research strategies or explaining an index
- fostering the independence of non-traditional students who typically prefer working at their own pace through use of guidelines and clear instructional signage
- providing in-depth answers for non-traditional students who usually demand more thorough explanations than typical students
- creating quiet areas and study spots, which are prized by non-traditional students

In addition, the library should also offer frequent tutorials on web-based research strategies, the library website, and other online information that may be pertinent to research and coursework.

Many adult students who are not currently employed lack financial resources to return to school. Educational institutions may incorporate a payment program or deferred tuition payment to help off-set course costs. In addition, if possible, institutions may have work study available in order to offer partial tuition assistance to students working within the institution.

In summary, corporate loyalty is not as prevalent as it was in the past, and working professionals must be prepared to take on a multitude of roles outside of their normal role and responsibility within an organisation. Individuals must continue to build their resumes to reflect a variety of skills and abilities in order to be versatile in today's competitive job market and adults are finding that they must return to the classroom to upgrade their skills or obtain additional education to remain competitive.

Due to these on-going pressures, along with the added responsibilities of adults which are not experienced by traditional students, the non-traditional student faces a variety of barriers when entering the classroom which the traditional student does not typically encounter. These barriers include pressures to balance work, school and family, lack of financial resources, and overall discomfort with the new technological advancement and procedures of the educational institutions that exist today, which did not exist several years ago. It is the responsibility of the educational institution and the course instructors to recognise and overcome these barriers in every way possible, to help ensure that the non-traditional student feels comfortable and welcomed when returning to the classroom.

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BOOK REVIEW

Education and the ideal

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In January 2004, Prime Minister John Howard triggered a heated debate when he claimed that an absence of values in government schools was a cause of the drift to independent schools. This was not the first time that he had chosen to speak out on education matters. After visiting Gallipoli in 2000, he expressed concern that history was not being taught in the right way and that too much emphasis was placed on issues at the expense of facts and much of the content projected a negative view of Australia's past – a view popularised in Geoffrey Blainey's 1993 notion of Black Armband history (for an analysis of the struggle over school history, see Clark 2004).

Howard's claims were yet another reminder that education is a highly contested and politicised arena. At the core of this struggle is the