

Who are the Adult Learners Today?

Cynthia Benn Tweedell, Ph.D.

Indiana Wesleyan University

There is a wealth of literature about the characteristics and motivations of adult learners. However, much of this literature pertains to adult students in traditional programs. There is a void in the research on the characteristics and motivations of adults in nontraditional programs. This section reviews some of the work done in this field and explores the implications for best practices for adult focused institutions.

Characteristics and motivations of adult students

A 2003 report from the National Center for Education Statistics indicates that about 43% of undergraduate students are over 24 years old. Of these students, about two-thirds considered employment, rather than study, as their main activity. (NCES, 2003)

Merriam & Caffarella,(1999) in their book, Learning in adulthood, present a comprehensive literature review of research on adult students. Surprisingly, the profile of the adult learner has remained largely unchanged since they were first studied in 1969. Compared to the rest of the adult population, adults in formal education programs at colleges and universities have higher than average income, are more likely to be white, and suburban. These findings are confirmed by DeJoy (1997) who also adds that adult learners have been out of school for an average of five years. They are more likely to be female than male. Our data from over 6000 students entering Indiana Wesleyan University's College of Adult and Professional Studies, verify that adult students are predominantly female with above average family income. However, these recent studies indicate that, particularly in urban areas, there are an increasing number of diverse students who are drawn to adult studies (2003).

Why do these adult learners choose to participate in a formal education program at this point in their lives? As the adult student population increases, new motivations have emerged. An older national study by Johnstone and Rivera in 1965 (cited in Merriam & Caffarella, 1999) showed that the most common reason adults chose to enter education was for personal goals/satisfaction. A later study by DeJoy (1997) showed similar results. Our current data indicate that about one-third of adult students attend for personal satisfaction while two-thirds seek career development (2003).

A previous generation of adult students encountered cultural barriers to participation. According to Cross (1981), the strongest predictors of participation were previous educational attainment and age. Previous educational experience leads to positive or negative attitudes about education, which can enhance or create a barrier for participation. Age is a factor because there is a socialized attitude that learning is for young people. Proximity is also very important. Adults must have educational opportunities conveniently located for them to increase participation. Also Cross notes that older, more mature learners are somewhat more likely than younger, less well-established adults to select a program that departs from the traditional.

DeJoy's (1997) more recent study found similar motivations. Younger adults (ages 25-34) are more degree oriented and interested in enhancing their careers through adult education. Older adults (ages 35-44) are sometimes degree oriented in order to gain greater independence and more responsibility at work. But many are also in a phase of their lives where they seek more balance in their lives- not simply achievement for achievement's sake. DeJoy's (1997) research at George Fox College found older adults more likely to seek personal goal/satisfaction as their primary reason for returning to college.

Our data from over 6000 students at Indiana Wesleyan University's College of Adult and Professional Studies indicate that convenience is the overwhelming reason why they choose this particular adult program. They demand a program which is specifically designed for the adult student, located near their home and allows fast degree completion. Many of the best practices in today's adult-focused institutions include formats that specifically target middle class adults by removing barriers to their participation. The most successful programs have convenient locations, easy registration and convenient delivery of resources. These practices have opened participation to a much broader range of adults.

Merriam & Caffarella (1999) cover several models of adult participation including:

1. Miller's force field analysis indicating that younger, lower SES learners are motivated by economic needs while older, higher SES learners have self-realization and achievement needs.
2. Boshier's congruency model looking at the congruence between the participant and the educational environment as the key determinants of persistence. He found it was easier to predict persisters than drop outs.
3. Rubenson's expectancy-valence model indicating that expectancies lead to values which produce a force for or against education.
4. Cross' Chain of Response model including self-evaluation and attitudes about education plus life transitions, importance of goals and opportunities lead to participation.
5. Darkenwald & Merriam positing that SES is a dominant influence and the pressure of the environment ("learning press") is also important.
6. Cookson and ISSTAL Model, which stands for "interdisciplinary, sequential specificity, time allocation, life span.

Capabilities of adult learners

Are adult learners less able to learn? Recent studies have disputed the idea that cognitive ability declines with age. Crystallized intelligence (based on formal and informal experience) tends to increase with age, while fluid intelligence (based on memory, creativity and learning style) tends to decline. Older people often need more time to perceive stimuli before learning can occur. But when the pace of learning is controlled, there is little decline in the ability to learn. Much traditional education capitalizes on the strengths of younger adults. Adult education should "de-emphasize the processing and acquisition of large amounts of new information, emphasizing instead the

development of cognitive functions calling for integration, interpretation, and application of knowledge. Speed and quickness in learning would also give way to emphasis on responsibility and accuracy “(Romero, 1990, p. 10).

Some physical changes that affect adult education include vision and auditory decline. These occur most significantly between the ages of forty-five and fifty-five. Often this physical decline results in a lack of self-confidence in learning for adults (Romero, 1990).

Engagement in academic activity

There is a perception that since adults are very interested in a quick and convenient way to complete a college degree, they are less engaged in academic activity than traditional-aged students. Yet, 2004 data produced by the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) at a Midwest university with a large adult enrollment, contradicts this notion. When we compared 244 adult students with 117 traditional students, NSSE data indicates that adults are very engaged in academic activity, but in different ways than traditional students. Specifically:

- Adults spend more time preparing for classes and produce more academic work (papers, presentations). Despite the fact that they are juggling families and careers, they take their academic work very seriously.
- Adults are less likely to come to class without completing readings or assignments.
- In class, adults are more likely to ask questions or contribute to discussions.
- Adults have good quality relationships with other adult students. They work with together with classmates on assignments and perceive that the university has contributed to their skill in working effectively with others.
- Because adult students are more involved in the world beyond the college campus, they are more likely than traditional-aged students to be exposed to diverse people and ideas. They are more likely to include these diverse perspectives in class discussions or writing assignments.
- Adults are more likely than traditional-aged students to gain an appreciation for diverse ideas and values. And they are more likely to believe that the real value of a college education lies in being introduced to different ideas and values.

Graduation rates

The National Center for Education Statistics (2003) report relatively low graduation rates for adult students who are full time employees. They report a 38% graduation rate within six years. Many students (32%) leave within their first year of college. But many of the best practices in adult focused institutions result in graduation rates much higher than this. Our data from Indiana Wesleyan University’s College of Adult and Professional Studies indicate that nearly 80% persist to graduation and less than 10% leave in the first year.

While adult students in traditional programs are likely to drop in the first year (NCES, 2003), students in some programs that exemplify best practices are very likely to

persist to graduation. This could probably be attributed to the experiential nature of learning at these institutions. Many of the best institutions provide students with a supportive cohort group that aids in the practical application of learning. An accelerated format and convenient scheduling of classes enable students to complete the degree with minimal disruption of their personal lives.

What are the keys to persistence in adult-focused institutions? Remarkably, the principles explaining retention for adult students are very similar to that of traditional-aged students. Both adults and traditional students need to find socio-emotional support from both on and off campus sources. The best adult programs are designed so that students find connections with other students and faculty who lend support when life creates barriers. Retention studies of students in an adult-focused institution indicate that the cohort model and high quality faculty encourage students to persist (Tweedell, 2003).

What happens to adult students in traditional programs? Bean and Metzner (1985) indicate that non-traditional students are distinguished from their traditional counterparts by their intense academic and vocational orientation to college. When adults are compared to traditional students, interaction with faculty and peers are not of the same duration and intensity. Adults have more interaction with faculty about academic topics, but the duration of that interaction is lower than for traditional students. Traditional students may spend an hour in a faculty member's office discussing personal issues. Outside encouragement, from family and community appear to replace on-campus support as a key to retention for adults.

In the Bean and Metzner model, retention decisions may often be beyond the scope of the institution. It applies to nontraditional students in a traditional college setting. However, in some of the best practices in adult focused institutions, interactions with both faculty and peers are intense and vital. Such a model transforms the faculty role into one of facilitator and mentor rather than lecturer. This fosters close student/faculty relationships. Interaction with peers is also transformed into a vital working relationship. Students must rely on peer relationships for success in study group assignments. This model gives the institution the means to intervene in retention decisions.

It appears that adults, like their traditional counterparts, are very dependent on social factors for success in college. At Indiana Wesleyan University, students report (on alumni surveys and focus group interviews) close relationships with peers and facilitators. This is fostered by the cohort model which makes extensive use of study groups. These relationships are crucial in student persistence (Tweedell & Roeschley, 1999).

Kerka (1995) found that for adult students, retention is linked to a number of factors: a gap between learner expectations and reality; past school and home experiences; educational and practical concerns; and social integration. Adult learners are at varying stages of the life cycle compared to the traditional population and have more diverse reasons for leaving. For adults, social integration is not just fitting in to the campus setting- it involves how well they integrate the pursuit of education into their overall lives.

Following are data on adult students from Indiana Wesleyan University. They demonstrate the importance of building convenient programs which include social supports that reduce barriers to completion.

**Table 1: Demographic Characteristics Entering Adult Students
Indiana Wesleyan University
2003 – 2004
(n=3757)**

Why did you choose to get a college degree at this point in your life?

(Scale 1-5; 5 = very important)

| | N | Mean | Std. Dev |
|---------------------------------|------|------|----------|
| Self development | 3748 | 4.56 | 0.74 |
| Career advancement | 3746 | 4.43 | 0.93 |
| Personal satisfaction | 3750 | 4.41 | 0.97 |
| Salary increases | 3752 | 4.14 | 1.08 |
| Need to develop specific skills | 3740 | 3.87 | 1.03 |
| God's calling in your life | 3723 | 3.86 | 1.21 |
| Job security | 3744 | 3.76 | 1.23 |
| Desire to change careers | 3729 | 3.23 | 1.45 |

What was the primary reason for choosing to go to college at this time?

| | Frequency | Percent |
|-----------------------------|-----------|---------|
| Personal satisfaction | 1403 | 37.7 |
| Development of a new career | 745 | 20.0 |
| Career advancement | 1495 | 40.1 |

What were the reasons that you chose this college?

| | N | Mean | Std. Dev |
|---|------|------|----------|
| Convenience | 3699 | 4.61 | 0.75 |
| Opportunity for faster degree completion | 3726 | 4.55 | 0.77 |
| Program specifically designed for the adult student | 3733 | 4.54 | 0.82 |
| Compatible with personal schedule | 3330 | 4.53 | 0.81 |
| Location / Accessibility | 3718 | 4.41 | 0.91 |
| Like the format of the program | 835 | 4.37 | 0.84 |
| Academic reputation of IWU | 3704 | 3.91 | 1.01 |
| Christian world view | 3714 | 3.87 | 1.19 |
| Acceptance of previous college credits | 3683 | 3.33 | 1.51 |
| Employer reimbursement | 817 | 2.88 | 1.65 |

Primary reason for choosing this college

| | Frequency | Percent |
|----------------------|-----------|---------|
| Affordability | 2651 | 72.7 |
| Christian world view | 371 | 10.2 |
| Academic reputation | 403 | 11.1 |
| Convenience | 115 | 3.2 |

How important were the following people in your decision to choose this college?

| | N | Mean | Std. Dev |
|--------------------------------|------|------|----------|
| Former students | 3567 | 2.81 | 1.57 |
| Current students | 3573 | 2.70 | 1.58 |
| College staff or administrator | 3543 | 2.69 | 1.48 |
| Employer | 3551 | 2.49 | 1.48 |
| Faculty | 3518 | 2.37 | 1.43 |

Race

| | Frequency | Percent |
|------------------|-------------|--------------|
| African American | 610 | 16.5 |
| Asian | 16 | 0.4 |
| Hispanic | 59 | 1.6 |
| White | 2919 | 79.3 |
| Other | 82 | 2.2 |
| Total | 3686 | 100.0 |

Gender

| | Frequency | Percent |
|--------------|-------------|--------------|
| Male | 1413 | 37.8 |
| Female | 2324 | 62.2 |
| Total | 3737 | 100.0 |

How long has it been since you took a college course?

| | Frequency | Percent |
|------------------|-------------|--------------|
| Never | 206 | 5.5 |
| Less than 1 year | 1055 | 28.4 |
| 1-3 years | 844 | 22.7 |
| 3-5 years | 545 | 14.7 |
| 5-10 years | 516 | 13.9 |
| Over 10 years | 551 | 14.8 |
| Total | 3717 | 100.0 |

Family income

| | Frequency | Percent |
|--------------|-------------|--------------|
| Under \$20k | 149 | 4.1 |
| \$20k-\$40k | 944 | 26.1 |
| \$41k-\$60k | 848 | 23.5 |
| \$61k-\$80k | 790 | 21.8 |
| \$81k-\$100k | 496 | 13.7 |
| over \$100k | 389 | 10.8 |
| Total | 3616 | 100.0 |

Today's adult students tend to be white, female, with above average income. They are interested in finding more personal and career satisfaction in their present situation. They seek programs which remove the barriers of access, fitting well within their professional and personal lives. Yet, adults do not seek shortcuts on academic quality. They desire a rigorous program and will put in the time and effort required to pursue academic excellence. Their attitudes are quite different from traditional aged students and they do not want to be treated like a traditional student. Adult students want a special program designed just for them with their special needs in mind.

Adults are often an invisible category of students. They are often forgotten in program planning and are sometimes not considered as an underserved population. Just as colleges look at data on gender and race in order to plan special programs to better serve students, so they would also be advised to look at their enrollment by age. These statistics are available in IPEDS data. Marketing, admissions or institutional research offices often have access to data about student age. To assess the needs of their adult student population, colleges can take advantage of special surveying services from Noel-Levitz, ACT or others.

Why create special programs for adults? Because they are highly motivated, adult students often do very well in classes alongside traditional students. But, adult students who are currently in traditional education have often chosen this route because there are no alternative adult programs available to them. So they "make do" with what is available. They don't seem to create "problems" for administrators on traditional campuses, so there is often little consideration for their needs. But there are many, many adults who are not currently enrolled in higher education, and would choose to do so if adult-oriented programs were accessible for them. Colleges that offer an alternative program for adult students find that they are enrolling many more students than they ever had before.

Why create special programs for adult students when they already appear to do well in traditional programs? Adult focused institutions have found that they have greatly increased access to an underserved population and thereby increased the educational attainment of their communities. Adults with college degrees become citizens who greatly contribute to the economic base and improve society.

References

Bean, J. & Metzner, B. (1985). A conceptual model of nontraditional undergraduate student attrition. Review of Educational Research 55, 485-650.

DeJoy, J. (1997). Adult education: Who participates and why. How providers of adult education can create a climate conducive to promoting greater participation in undergraduate degree programs. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 412 354)

Kerka, S. (1995). Adult retention revisited. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 389 880)

Merriam, S. & Caffarella, R. (1999). Learning in adulthood. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

National Center for Educational Statistics. (2003) Work first, study second: Adult undergraduates who combine employment and postsecondary enrollment. U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences NCES2003-167.

Romero, F. (1990). Aspects of adult development. In Rossman, M and Rossman, M. (eds.) Applying adult development strategies. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, pp. 3 – 11.

Tweedell, C. and Roeschley, S. (1999) Student retention in a nontraditional RNBS Completion Program. Marion, IN: Indiana Wesleyan University.

Tweedell, C. (2003) What works in retention for adult programs. Presentation for International Conference of First Year Experience. Vancouver.