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WHAT ADULT LEARNERS HAVE TO SAY ABOUT THEIR COLLEGE EXPERIENCE

George D. Kuh & Frank P. Ardalolo

Adult learners (students 23 years of age or older) are coming to colleges and universities in increasing numbers (Hodgkinson, 1976) and many admissions officers are hoping their presence will partly offset the projected decrease in traditional-age (17-21) college students. Without question, programs designed to appeal to adults such as life-long learning, continuing education and non-credit courses have become increasingly important for maintaining enrollments in many postsecondary institutions (Harrington, 1977).

Most adult learners are also pursuing associate and baccalaureate degree coursework that traditionally have been targeted for younger students. Initial attempts to identify the demographic characteristics (e. g., educational aspirations, major field, etc.) of adult learners in these programs have been conducted on the national level (Broschart, 1976; Carp, Peterson & Roelfs, 1974; Kimmel 1976) as well as within a statewide system of postsecondary education (Kuh & Ardailol, 1978a, 1978b). The results of these inquiries have suggested that traditional academic programs may not be able to adequately meet the needs of non-traditional students.

It is apparent that more than demographic data are needed if we are to become more familiar with the aspirations and motivations of adult learners. To adequately meet the needs of older students, college student personnel workers will have to enter into a dialogue with them to discover vicariously the adult learner experience. It is possible that discussions could create the *illusion* of proactive intervention when, in reality, a policy of "benign neglect" similar to that advocated by Moynihan (1969) concerning the government's response to the plight of urban minorities is operating. After determining what adult learners need, we must respond accordingly by modifying traditional but inappropriate service modalities or creating new structures and services to meet their needs.

This article reports the salient concerns raised in hour-long interviews with 30 (12 men, 18 women) randomly selected adult learners during the first month of the 1977 Fall semester. The interviews were tape recorded and transcribed as part of a larger study (n=273) designed to assess demographic characteristics of and personality change in students 23 years of age and over at two campuses of Indiana University. In the following paragraphs, adult learners speak for themselves: about their reasons for enrolling in college now rather than before, about their experiences during

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the first few weeks of college—including concomitant pressures and anxieties, and about the programs and services they felt should be available.

Reasons for Attending

In general, we found adult learners to be very mature and quite definite in their reasons for attending college. The main reasons cited by this group of students for going to college at this time in their lives tended to cluster around either (1) a desire for a better job; i. e., need for additional preparation to qualify for more satisfactory and satisfying position, or (2) to more fully develop one's own talents.

"I had various jobs and I was unable to find anything that interested me. Along with that, I was unable to find someone, an employer, willing to train me in something I'm interested in. So, the only way for me to get into something that I'm interested in was to get the training myself...."

—a divorced male, 26, with one child

"I had talked about it (going back to school), I guess ever since I've been married and never had the nerve because I felt I was older than all the other students here. And that was my biggest drawback. And I guess I felt that there's a lot of opportunity open to me but, I guess, the most important thing was eventually I knew my daughters are going to school or get married and I don't want to just become a person who is a secretary or a file clerk. I think, I **know**, I have more potential than that. I see now that there's a lot more for women I think it was time to do it now. For if I feel badly about coming back at my age, if I waited until my daughters were through school and then came back, I probably wouldn't do it."

—a married woman, 26, with 3 children

The reference to age as a potential drawback to enrolling was a common concern: the embarrassment associated with being older in a predominately youth-oriented environment. Virtually every adult learner we talked with mentioned having to cope with this fear. We could not help but wonder how many other adults are interested in attending college but will not do so because of these feelings.

Immaturity, poor grades, and, to a lesser extent, financial constraints were the reasons most often given for not attending college soon after high school. According to our interviewees, their immaturity was manifested in high school by failure to realize the importance of postsecondary education for both job satisfaction and appreciation of one's self as a unique, contributing member of society. As a result, they were less interested in academic achievement in high school. Nonetheless, many adult learners have unique talents and have acquired a variety of skills not often recognized and rewarded by traditional curricula and instructional methods. In addition, they expect to receive a return on their investment of time and money. These two expectations may kindle a hybrid of educational consumerism not yet known to postsecondary educators.

“Because you've got only so many hours and so many days and so many years to get a degree, you've got to be self-sufficient...unless I find somebody that is going to whisk me off to the Bahamas. And what happens when he finds out I've got five kids? That was a predominating force for me when I applied in April. Then in August they advised me and the academic advisor didn't know what to say. He was mortified. 'What do you want to do?', he asked. I said, 'I want to do what I'm doing (biofeedback therapist) but I want a degree' (also). He didn't know where to start. He said, 'Well just pick courses and take things.' ”

—a divorced and recently widowed woman,
31, with 5 children

Adult learners want accurate information and quality instruction. The frustration of the adult learner-as-consumer is clearly expressed in the words of another student:

“Well, I'm somewhat bored with college in the aspect that they treat most of the students like they're straight out of high school. You know, they treat them (adult students) like they were high school students and like myself, they're not. I've been around and I've done things and I feel like I'm further along than they (traditional freshmen) are to be treated down at that level again.”

—a single male, 24

The First Days on Campus

For many adult learners, the first few days at the university were characterized by a good deal of anxiety, fleeting thoughts of panic, and extreme nervousness.

“There were a lot of the 'knowing school' type things. Kids walking around in their spiffy new outfits that they all packed up just before they went away to school and their brand new books and notebooks. Well, for one thing, I didn't even know what kind of notebooks would be required or anything. I called up a friend and asked what she found helpful....And it was fun at first, kind of a honeymoon period when, 'Oh gee, isn't this neat? I got my new pencils and my notebooks and my new books.' And then there became, I think, a period that could be likened to culture shock when I became hostile. Like, 'What do I need this (college) for? I've been doing fine for eleven years without it, without this pain and suffering and now I'm purposefully putting myself through this! ’ ”

—a married woman, 29, with 2 children

Many spoke about being overwhelmed at the size of the institution and coping with a much different routine. Others related the “second thoughts” they had about having enrolled and gave serious thought to leaving school.

"I was very confused my first days on campus. I was lost all the time, you know, just the whole freshman syndrome you hear about. I couldn't find my way around campus. I was really frightened, you know. Everybody was a lot smarter than I was, you know, like it was going to be a real difficult thing. I even thought that I might be making a big mistake."

—a divorced woman, 30 with 3 children

"I kept thinking, am I crazy? What am I doing here? So, it was just kind of like I was in a dream world. I really kind of felt like, well, maybe I didn't belong here."

—a married woman, 49, with 8 children

How adult learners would fare in academic competition with younger students was an additional source of anxiety.

"I think I felt very much out of place, just very self-conscious. I felt like everybody was staring at me. And I was worried that maybe I didn't retain all the things that I learned in school or maybe, since it was ten years ago, it was so different than what these high school seniors have learned that I just probably wasn't going to catch up."

—a married woman, 26, with 3 children

Other types of comparison were also inevitable.

"The first day of class I walked in with a dress on and everyone had jeans on. I just wanted to slip under the chair or something. I went out and bought jeans. And I wore them two days and I decided that this wasn't me either."

—married woman, 26, with 3 children

During the first few weeks, support from significant others, usually a spouse or sibling often attending the same institution, was invaluable to ameliorating the anxiety associated with adjusting to the university environment. (So many interviewees mentioned having a relative enrolled in the university that we could not help but think about whether a casual relationship existed between the relative's attendance and the adult learner's decision to enroll.) The support of family, particularly the spouse, was most important in light of the fact that for many adult learners, going to college severely disrupted the family's routine as well as exerted a financial strain (tuition, fees, books) on already heavily constrained budgets.

"My husband is supportive of my college attendance. The first night that I came home, well, I still had my evening class to go to yet, and he came home from work a little late and I was just about ready to get after him and

he had brought me a dozen roses. He was so proud about my going back to school! And my kids think it's neat, 'Mommy is in school and I'm in school. How come daddy doesn't go to school?' "

—a married woman, 27, with 2 children

Self-induced achievement anxiety was also exhibited by a good many adult learners, particularly the relationship between academic achievement and securing a better job. In fact, many older students had left full-time positions in order to attend the university and hopefully qualify for a better, more satisfying position after college.

"I need to **excell** and....develop aspects about myself that would be appealing to an employer after I graduate."

—a married man, 28, with one child

"I want to do good in classes because I know, like I've been working in a factory, and I know what it's like being a factory worker and I don't want to do that again. So, I've got to do good because I don't want to go back."

— single man, 24

Student Services

For the most part, our interviewees indicated that they were being treated relatively well by the university and that faculty were fairly responsive to their needs. Adult learners believed they were also respected by younger students. In fact, they were getting along so well with other students that their initial fears about not being accepted in the university environment were beginning to dissipate.

It was somewhat ironic that while most aspects of the institution were responsive to older students and their unique needs, student services policies and practices seemed to be somewhat flexible. Offices open only during regular daytime hour (8-5) caused problems particularly for students who commuted some distance to the university for late afternoon and evening classes.

"If they didn't have a child-care center then I probably wouldn't have come back to school. It's really terrible when your whole career depends on the fact that your child is potty trained or not. And I didn't know he had to be until I already enrolled and everything. And they said she had to be potty trained! I said, 'Oh, wow!' That was the fastest two weeks of training. I was lucky, my son was three."

—a married woman, 28, with 2 children

A particularly discouraging finding was the realization that many adult learners were not aware of the various student services available. In fact, a

large number of referrals were made during the course of the interviews, most often to reading and study skills, career planning, financial aids, academic advising, and the counseling center.

With only a few exceptions, our interviewees had not attended any extracurricular activities, largely because the demands of family, job, and academic assignments left little time for such pursuits. Of less importance but nonetheless noteworthy was their perception that the majority of activities sponsored by the university appeared tailored to younger students and, as a result, were of little interest to adult learners.

"One reason I don't attend activities is because I feel like I don't have the time. Another reason might be I really don't know that many people on campus at all. I know a few of the students. I just feel maybe because of my age, too, I feel like an outsider....it seems all the university activities are geared toward the younger students."

—a married man, 26, one child

What We Hear Them Saying Is...

Adult learners are relatively mature, highly motivated, and, unlike their younger counterparts, somewhat reluctant to complain. Although the potential exists for an assertive consumer advocacy to come within this group, a more likely scenario is one in which adult learners will become the victims of "benign neglect." This will certainly be the case if decisionmakers in postsecondary institutions continue to provide adult learners with structures and services designed for traditional age students.

Perhaps what adult learners need most from the university is a comprehensive continuous orientation program. The program must do more than merely acclimate students to the institution's physical plant (although that too is more important than some believe!). Some effort must be made to ease the transition from worker and mother to a multirole lifestyle that includes "student". Also, adult learners must be provided with an opportunity to interact with one another so that they understand they are **not** alone. To some degree, support groups for women returning to school have met this need (Bradenburg, 1974). However, these groups must be made available to men also and be more visible to all adult learners earlier in the university experience.

A major segment of the orientation program's design should emphasize the academic expectations of the institution. It should serve to introduce students to a variety of behaviors necessary for satisfactory performance ranging from learning how to take notes and how to study to the most mundane of the academic endeavor; what type of notebook to buy. Of course, the myriad of student services that exist to assist adult learners must be made known to them. If this advertising campaign is successful, colleges and universities had better be prepared to actively listen to the concerns and issues presented by adult learners and respond with creative programming.

In spite of the problems mentioned above, this group of adult learners found their first weeks on campus to be an exciting and rewarding experience. The following student succinctly summarized over 30 hours of interviews:

"Oh, I'm really happy about attending college....It sort of changes a boring existence of staying at home watching soap operas and cleaning the house and the same old job day-in and day-out...Now I'm working towards something which gives a feeling of self-worth, self-satisfaction and I feel like I'm doing something...I really like it!"

—a married woman, 27, with 2 children

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