

# Adult Barriers To Higher Education: A Comparison Of Gender, Age, And Ethnicity In Faith-Based Colleges

Sara B. Kimmel, (Email: [skimmel@belhaven.edu](mailto:skimmel@belhaven.edu)), Belhaven College  
Mary Nell McNeese, (Email: [Mary.McNeese@usm.edu](mailto:Mary.McNeese@usm.edu)), University of Southern Mississippi

## ABSTRACT

*The study compares the responses of students in nontraditional undergraduate and graduate degree programs from three faith-based institutions and multiple campuses to determine what barriers exist for adult students. Nontraditional, in this case, refers to degree programs offered within the context of night classes and accelerated programs of study that cater primarily to working adults.*

## INTRODUCTION

The study compares the responses of students in nontraditional undergraduate and graduate degree programs from three faith-based institutions and multiple campuses to determine what barriers exist for adult students. Nontraditional, in this case, refers to degree programs offered within the context of night classes and accelerated programs of study that cater primarily to working adults.

Adult enrollment in higher education in the past two decades has provided a boon for colleges and universities. Jacobs (1998) examines the “life course transitions” that have provided baselines for studying adult student enrollment, and pays particular attention to delayed school enrollment, suggesting that future growth will not follow the aging trend line that has become apparent in recent years.

Other studies have focused on the tenacity of adult learners and the relationship of admissions test scores to predict college level performance in students over 24 years of age (Hensley & Kinser, 2001; House & Keeley, 1996). Lundberg (2003) suggests that adult student performance tends to be enhanced by social relationships and that barriers that would be significant to younger students are overcome due to advanced time management skills. The Osgood-Treston (2001) review of studies of adult learners suggests that adults seek or continue in learning environments when they can adapt easily to the role of student, multi-task, and be successful. Kirby, Biever, Martinez, and Gomez (2004) found that high family and workplace support lowered levels of stress in adult students. Mannone (2003) suggests that adults seek out learning experiences primarily for the knowledge or skill that leads to some other end.

Gender and ethnic differences have been researched extensively in motivation and performance expectations. Skaalvick and Skaalvick (2004) focused on gender stereotypes in self-concept in college students. Bell (2003) finds that there are significant differences in “stressors” of college students based on age and gender. Thornton, Hollenshead, and Larsh (1997) report the effect of the measurement device on gender and ethnic differences in motivation to manage. Greene and Greene (2004) examine the impact of declining numbers of males in traditional student populations and its resulting influence on the learning environment.

## METHODOLOGY

The survey instrument used items of significance noted in the literature review and the responses to open ended questions of cohorts of adult students in two faith-based college campus locations in Mississippi. Neither cohort was used in the study beyond formation of the survey, which was distributed to some 409 students (all business or business-related majors) on the campuses of three colleges. All three colleges had campuses in Mississippi, while one

had campuses in Florida and Tennessee also. The instrument was administered during Spring 2004 at four locations and during late Summer 2004 at the fifth location in Tennessee.

### **Response Rate**

Participants returned 401 completed surveys, 68.8% from Mississippi campuses, 22% from Florida, and 9.2% from Tennessee. Survey response was high, in keeping with the delivery of the questionnaire to existing cohorts of students in classroom settings.

### **Analysis and Findings**

The analysis of data was conducted in SPSS with between group differences analyzed using Levene's test for equality of variance and the t-test for equality of means.

### **Descriptive Statistics**

Females outnumbered males 64% to 36%. The highest participation (49.7%) came from the 25-34 age group; however, this was not the youngest age group represented. Some 58 of those surveyed reported their ages as 24 or younger, which places this group outside the boundaries of what would be considered a "non-traditional" student as defined in U.S. Census statistics. These students were excluded from the sample in the present study. Another 28.6% were 35-44, while the 45-54 age group represented 18.8% of respondents, and 3% were 55 or over. Only seven participants did not complete the age item. These students were also excluded from the sample since it could not be determined whether they met the "non-traditional" student criterion. The age reports roughly corresponded with participants' self-reported ages at which they entered their current degree program.

Race and ethnicity were measured using U.S. Census designations. Some 153 (45.5%) participants were white, with 150 (44.6%) Black or African American. Of the remainder, 13 (3.9%) indicated their race as "Other", and 10 (3%) reported themselves as Asian. Less than one percent reported their race as American Indian or Alaska Native, and 7 (2.1%) did not respond to the question. Of those responding to the previous race question, 12(3.6%) indicated they were Hispanic/Latino.

The highest percentage of respondents (35.4%) reported their total household income as between \$25,000-\$49,000. Another 22.6% reported income ranging from \$50,000-\$74,900, with 16.4% under \$25,000, and 13.7% between \$75,000 and \$99,999. Of the remainder, 33 (9.8%) reported income of \$100,000 and over, while 5 (1.5%) did not report income.

Approximately 43.5% of those surveyed reported no spouse living at home, while 55.7% reported having a spouse who lives with them and .9% did not respond to the spouse item. Nearly 43% of participants had at least one child below 12 years of age at home and over 25% reported children 12-18 at home. Almost 15.2% of respondents reported relatives who live with them and 8% reported having non-relatives who live with them.

Most (86.3%) of those surveyed were employed full-time, 9.2% were employed part-time, and the remaining students did not report, leaving the researcher to assume that approximately 4.5% of participants were not employed at the time of the survey.

### **FINDINGS**

As Table 1 indicates, the most pressing barriers for adult students according to general responses were the lack of childcare for a minor child or children, students' roles as primary caregivers for elders, and the lack of available funds to pay for childcare.

**Table 1**  
**General Barriers**

<b>Item</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>n</b>
Lack of childcare for minor child/children	3.00	1.64	336
Student’s role as primary caregiver for an elder	3.00	1.74	336
Lack of funds for childcare for minor child/children	2.96	1.67	336

Interestingly, aggregate statistics point to several group differences, particularly among those students who did not have minor children at home, those who did not have spouses who lived with them, and those who did not work fulltime.

**Table 2**  
**Barriers For Adult Students Related To Minor Children**

<b>Presence of minor children &lt; age 12</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std. Deviation</b>	<b>t</b>	<b>p</b>
<b>Barriers</b>					
Minor children present	142	37.27	14.29	-	.009
No minor child present	194	41.75	16.38	2.64	

As illustrated in Table 2, students who did not have minor children under the age of 12 self-reported significantly higher barriers overall (M = 41.75, SD = 16.38) than did those students who did have minor children at home (M= 37.27, SD = 14.29). As shown in Table 3, students who did not have spouses who lived with them reported that they faced significantly higher barriers (M = 41.78, SD = 15.17) than students who did report a spouse living in the home (M = 38.30, SD = 16.02).

**Table 3**  
**Barriers For Adult Students Related To Presence Of Spouse At Home**

<b>Presence of Spouse Living at Home</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std. Deviation</b>	<b>t</b>	<b>p</b>
<b>Barriers</b>					
Spouse at home	187	38.30	16.02	-2.01	.05
No spouse at home	146	41.78	15.17		

Table 4 illustrates the responses of students to the fulltime work item. Those who did not work fulltime reported that they faced significantly higher barriers (M = 45.62, SD = 17.86) than those who did work fulltime (M=38.98, SD = 15.30).

**Table 4**  
**Barriers For Students Related To Fulltime Employment**

<b>Fulltime Employment</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std. Deviation</b>	<b>t</b>	<b>p</b>
<b>Barriers</b>					
Employed Fulltime	290	38.98	15.30	-2.36	.02
Not Employed Fulltime	45	45.62	17.86		

**Gender Comparison**

In the first analysis of all participant responses from three states, no barriers were found to be statistically significant by gender; however, when responses from the 53 participants in the lowest age group (24 and under) were removed from the analysis, gender became significant. A third analysis was conducted using responses from college students in Tennessee, but removing the 24 and below age group. With the added responses gender was, again, nonsignificant. Table 5 illustrates responses from the second analysis.

**Table 5**  
**Significant Gender Differences In Barriers (Tennessee Excluded)**

<b>Item</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std. Deviation</b>	<b>t</b>
Concern about attending school with younger students was a barrier to my enrollment				
Female	192	2.26	1.26	2.02
Male	112	2.03	1.20	
The lack of personal funds to pay for college was a barrier to my enrollment				
Female	193	2.72	1.17	2.01
Male	112	2.48	1.29	

(p = .05)

Females (M=2.26, SD = 1.26) expressed significantly greater concern about attending school with younger students than did males (M=2.03, SD = 1.20). Females (M = 2.72, SD = 1.17) were also significantly more likely than males (M = 2.48, SD = 1.29) to report that the lack of personal funds to pay for college was a barrier to enrollment (Table 5).

**Age Comparison**

At the same time, excluding Tennessee campus student responses, the MANOVA using gender and age as independent variables was significant,  $\lambda (6, 506) = .05, F = 2.34, p = .03$ . Univariate follow-up tests were utilized to detect which, if any, independent variables showed interaction and which of the dependent variables contributed to the overall group differences, and showed a significant interaction between gender and age. Mean scores for males were significantly higher than females in the 25-34 and the 35-44 year old age groups but significantly lower than women in the 45-54 and 55 and higher age groups (Table 6). When the Tennessee campus student responses were added, age became insignificant.

**Table 6**  
**Comparison Of Barriers By Gender And Age (Tennessee Excluded)**

<b>Gender</b>	<b>25-34 yrs.</b>	<b>35-44 yrs.</b>	<b>45-54 yrs.</b>	<b>55 yrs. and up</b>
Female	37.96	38.56	46.64	55.75
Male	40.30	40.42	28.81	50.56

(p = .03)

**Ethnicity Comparison**

In the first examination of ethnicity, responses Tennessee campus students were not included. The samples were recoded into Majority (Caucasian/White) with an n of 153 and Minority (African American/Black, American Indian, Asian, & Other, including Hispanic/Latino) with an n of 183. Using the combined ethnic designations, there were a number of significant differences (one-tailed comparison) in barriers, as shown in Table 7.

**Table 7  
Comparison Of Barriers By Ethnicity (Tennessee Excluded)**

<b>Item #</b>	<b>t</b>	<b>df</b>	<b>p</b>	<b>Majority mean</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>Minority mean</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>SD</b>
F35	-1.74	277	.04	2.06	135	1.15	2.31	144	1.27
F42	-1.72	277	.04	2.08	135	1.50	2.40	144	1.60
F46	1.97	277	.03	3.27	135	1.68	2.88	144	1.58
F47	1.96	277	.03	3.20	135	1.71	2.81	144	1.58
F48	1.94	277	.03	3.19	135	1.77	2.79	144	1.67

Minority students were significantly more likely to face a lack of confidence in their abilities (F35) and parental discouragement (F42) than majority students. At the same time, majority students were significantly more likely to identify the lack of childcare (F46) and childcare funding (F47) for their minor children as a barrier to higher education. In addition, majority students were significantly more likely to indicate that they had the primary caregiver role for an elder (F48) than minority students. The findings suggest that minority students face significant domestic barriers related to influence from primary reference groups, particularly that of family; however, minority students may have a supportive network of caregivers for minor children that majority students do not experience.

The addition of the Tennessee campus responses increased the majority responses by 12% and the minority responses by 22%, and limited the significant items by race/ethnicity to three: availability of childcare, availability of childcare funding, and primary caregiver role for an elder, with results shown in Table 8.

**Table 8  
Comparison Of Barriers By Ethnicity**

<b>Item #</b>	<b>t</b>	<b>p</b>	<b>Majority mean</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>Minority mean</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>SD</b>
F46	2.11	.04	3.21	153	1.68	2.83	183	1.59
F47	2.06	.04	3.17	153	1.72	2.79	183	1.62
F48	2.17	.03	3.22	153	1.78	2.81	183	1.69

**IMPLICATIONS**

The challenges are numerous for administrators of higher education in the early part of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Traditional style campus learning environments face significant competition from online education providers, especially in the market for adult learners. If, as Jacobs (1998) suggests, the age trend for adult learners declines, administrators will be challenged to provide continuous improvements in products and services designed for adult learners in increasingly younger age groups. This scenario forces the reviewer to look specifically at the needs of current markets as identified through the barriers they face to the traditional style of education. The existence of distance learning programs eliminates or substantially reduces the barriers of travel, childcare expense, and childcare availability. As more accredited institutions enter the distance learning market, competition will increase for traditional institutions that have relied on the academic reputations of their colleges as compared with online degree programs that may have been “marginalized” by their lack of accreditation.

Recognition that barriers differ for students based on age, gender, and ethnicity should give administrators cause to support not only targeted marketing for students, but also targeted academic programming specifically for adult learners by group. The enrollment status of women and minorities, coupled with significant findings in barriers, should alert educators and administrators to the need for recognizing gender and ethnic differences as pivotal points for program development. The population of students in all schools of business is expected to grow continually diverse in the near future (Friga, et al., 2003).

## **FUTURE RESEARCH**

The study sought to investigate the barriers of adult students as a factor in their decision to seek an undergraduate or a graduate degree. Items that were considered to be marketing type influencers were intentionally left out of the survey, so as not to confound the study or confuse the survey participants. While the study did not specifically focus on the degree to which the publicly expressed statement of belief influences students to attend specific adult education programs in faith-based institutions, there is evidence from this study to indicate that the degree to which faith is emphasized is an influencer. This is a topic for further research and study among faith-based colleges. Additional research is also planned using adult student populations in public universities as comparison groups to facilitate findings that can be generalizable across the broader population of institutions of higher learning in the U.S. Fundamental to the generalizability of the present research and future studies suggested here, is the inclusion of campuses beyond the Southeastern region of the U.S. Several of the items noted as significant in the analysis became insignificant when the Tennessee responses were added to the sample, suggesting that there are additional factors that may influence student responses, including (but not limited to) geography, length of time the adult program has been in existence, and socioeconomics.

The significance of women's concern about funding higher education in adulthood is another area that deserves additional research, as does the role of social networks in motivating female and minority adult learners. Additional research could focus on the performance of females and similar age groups in cohort teams as a measure of motivation to participate. Determinants of income and the existence of minor children in the home would provide a source of individual study with regard to female and male enrollment. Further, the item cited as a more significant barrier to females than to males, "concern about attending school with younger students," should be further investigated as it relates to intrinsic motivation.

Minority adult learners should be an immediate focus for additional research in the higher learning environment in that their responses to the issues of self-esteem and family encouragement suggest that significant domestic barriers exist for minorities. Such barriers are rarely eliminated through the provision of additional programs and often require transformation over generations.

---

*The authors wish to thank M. Ray Grubbs (Millsaps College), Marcelo Eduardo (Mississippi College), Chip Mason (Belhaven College), and Melvin Holder (Belhaven College)*

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

1. Bell, James. Statistics Anxiety: The Non-traditional Student. *Education* V 124, I 1 (Fall 2003): 157 (6).
2. Friga, Paul N., Richard A. Bettis, and Robert S. Sullivan. Change in Graduate Management Education and New Business School Strategies for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. *Learning and Education* V 2, N 3 (September 2003): 233.
3. Greene, Howard and Matthew Greene. The Widening Gender Gap. *University Business* V 7, N 9 (September 2004): 27.
4. Hensley, Laura G. and Kevin Kinser. Perspectives of Adult Learners on Returning to College: A Study of Tenacious Persisters. *Academic Exchange Quarterly* V 5, I 12 (Summer 2001): 181.
5. House, J. Daniel and Edward J. Keeley. Differential Prediction of Adult Student Performance from Miller Analogies Test Scores. *Journal of Genetic Psychology* V 157, N 4 (December 1996): 3.
6. Jacobs, Jerry A. and Scott Stoner-Eby. Adult Enrollment and Educational Attainment. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* V 559, P 91 (September 1998): 18.

7. Kirby, Peter G., Joan L. Biever, Isaac G. Martinez, and John P. Gomez. Adults Returning to School: The Impact on Family and Work. *Journal of Psychology* V 138, N 1 (January 2004): 65.
8. Lundberg, Carol A. The Influence of Time – Limitations, Faculty, and Peer Relationships on Adult Student Learning: A Causal Model. *Journal of Higher Education* V 74, I 6 (November-December 2003): 665(24).
9. Mannone, Marty. Understanding How Adults Learn. *San Fernando Valley Business Journal* V 8, N 20 (September 2003): 13(1).
10. Osgood-Treston, Brit. Program Completion Barriers Faced by Adult Learners in Higher Education. *Academic Exchange Quarterly* V 5, I 2 (Summer 2001): 120.
11. Skaalvick, Sidsel and Einar M. Skaalvick. Gender Differences in Math and Verbal Self-Concept, Performance Expectations, and Motivation. *Sex Roles: A Journal of Research* V 50, I 3-4 (February 2004): 241(12).
12. Thornton, George C., Janet D. Hollenshead, and Suzanne L. Larsh. Comparison of Two Measures of Motivation to Manage: Ethnic and Gender Differences. *Educational and Psychological Measurement* V 57, N 2 (April 1997): 241(13).

NOTES