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Nontraditional Students in Higher Education: Meeting Their Needs as Learners

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Abstract

The research literature indicates nontraditional students in higher education are different from their traditional counterparts. Understanding our university clientele is important in being able to meet their needs. Instructors are encouraged to analyze their teaching strategies and to incorporate those which can further aid older students in their educational pursuits.

Terms the general public may use to describe a college student could include career directed, young, eager, rebellious, inquisitive, partier, and idealistic. While these descriptors may be somewhat accurate, the majority of the words are intended to describe only a portion of the college population—the stereotypical traditional-aged college student. Movies and television shows further depict college students in a very customary light according to age. Often, the college experience is seen as the last time to fully enjoy life without everyday realities coming into play. Increasingly, this picture is not the reality for a large number of college students. . . the nontraditional-aged persons attending institutions of higher education.

Nontraditional students are defined as those individuals who are age twenty-five and older and are either working on a bachelor's degree or post-baccalaureate non-degree program (Bishop-Clark & Lynch, 1992; Beder & Darkenwald, 1982; Breese & O'Toole, 1994). They are often referred to as older students, returning students, or adult students. The number of nontraditional students in colleges and universities has reached forty-five percent of all undergraduate students enrolled in higher education institutions. This is an increase of seven percent over the past decade (Rose, 1994; U.S. Department of Education, 1994). It is estimated that by the year 2000, over twenty million older students will be enrolled (Grottkau & Davis, 1987; Haviland & Mahaffy, 1985).

The nontraditional student population is a significant group in undergraduate programs in terms of both numbers and percentage of enrollment. As these numbers continue to increase, undergraduate institutions must look at the uniqueness of the adult learner and attempt to meet their needs. The purpose of this paper is to review the research conducted on nontraditional students in an attempt to help individuals better understand and work with this large sector of the higher education population in the classroom.

Historical Background

Prior to 1940, adults sought out program alternatives such as evening classes, special "adults only" offerings, off-campus programs, and correspondence study (Kasworm, 1980). Colleges and universities during this time focused on the traditional 16-24 year old student. Two events in the past 50 years have changed the look of college campus populations. First, in the mid-1940's a shift toward nontraditional students in daytime undergraduate education began with the enactment of the "GI Bill". Thousands of veterans entered daytime collegiate programs accounting for a total of 27.6% of the entire undergraduate enrollment in the 1945-46 academic year (Kasworm, 1980). A second significant event in undergraduate programs occurred from 1960-72. It was the emergence of "re-entry women". A "three fold gain" of nontraditional enrollment was registered during that time period by women students who were 25 to 34 years of age. Further the Women's Bureau of the U.S. Department of Labor (1974) estimated this gain was probably exceeded by women over 35.

This growth in nontraditional student population has continued in recent years. Contributing factors relate to changing career and leisure expectations, advances in technology and business operations, changing roles of men and women in society, and the rise in consciousness regarding life quality (Hall & Miller, 1989; Iovacchini, Hall & Hengstler, 1985).

Profile of the Nontraditional Student

Adult students are a highly diverse group that don't easily fit into a neat demographic, homogeneous profile. Yet, several studies have attempted to further define characteristics of the nontraditional student.

Sewall (1986) surveyed 1007 degree seeking adults to determine a profile of who these nontraditional students are. Results showed that nearly three-quarters of the respondents were between 25 and 34 years of age. After age 35, women were more likely to enroll than men by a ration of nearly three to one. Approximately two-thirds of the nontraditional-aged students were married. Seventy-four percent of the adults had children and 66% were employed—43% full time and 23% part time. In addition, nearly two-thirds had previously attended a college or university before dropping out or not completing their degree for some reason.

Differing results pertaining to age proportions were found by Charmer (1980) and Cross (1980), who revealed that one-half to three-quarters of the adult participants in undergraduate higher education were over 35 years of age. Cross (1981) also found socioeconomic differences between the older and traditional-aged students. Degree seeking adults typically come from working class backgrounds and, for the most part, are first generation college students. Parents of the traditional college students have tended to be better educated than parents of nontraditional students.

The major reasons cited for college entry by the older students ranged from developing a new career, wanting to learn, and having the satisfaction of obtaining a degree. Although reasons varied, job and family circumstances accounted for the majority of reasons cited for returning to school (Sewall, 1986; Hu, 1985; Osborne, Cope & Johnstone, 1994).

Typically the older student attends college on a part time basis. However, many institutions are reporting more full time adult students in their programs (Grace & Fife, 1987).

Solomon and Gordon (1981), and Bers and Smith (1987), found the desire to live at home, the specialized programs offered at the institution, low tuition, and the availability of financial aid were the components considered important by nontraditional students in selecting a college. Traditional students tended to indicate that the academic reputation of the college was important in their selection.

A significant portion of adult students must cope with dual responsibilities of job and family in addition to attending school. These factors play an important role in the older student's decision to delay entry to higher education and frequently trigger their return. Gustafson and Sorgaman (1983) and Osborne, Cope and Johnstone (1994) found that older students report being more concerned about flexible class scheduling, child care problems, and the need for credit for experiential learning than traditional students. In addition, nontraditional students were found to have many of the same problems reported by their younger counterparts: high concern in having too little time for course work and lack of information regarding career paths. Due to all these factors, it is not surprising that older students report difficulty in integrating into student life (Bradley & Cleveland, 1992; Vanderpool & Brown, 1994).

As more women enroll in higher education, new problems have been encountered. Gerson (1985) found that nontraditional women experienced greater role gratification but also encountered greater strain in their multiple roles. Robertson (1991) reported that women and men often take different routes when entering and completing their programs in postsecondary education. Women are more likely to have more interruptions in their academic career that are attributed to more diverse role demands and greater relationship responsiveness by women (Hatch, 1990; McBride, 1990). However, Breese and O'Toole (1994) report that women also seek out higher education as a coping mechanism to deal with a role transition in their own lives. Examples of these role transitions include: divorce, death, children leaving home, and/or the youngest child starting school. Perhaps

not surprising is that nontraditional females reported a significantly higher degree of dissatisfaction with institutional climate, especially during their first year (Gustafson & Sorgaman, 1983; Wilkie & Thompson, 1993).

Several researchers (Fujita-Starck, 1996; Morstain & Smart, 1974) caution instructors to not heavily rely on adult student demographics as their means to understand this learner. Instead, they urge us to analyze the nontraditional's motivation for attending higher education institutions. Without this information, they say, erroneous generalizations may be made.

The Nontraditional Student in the Classroom

Historically, American colleges and universities focused curriculum programs and institutional mission on the younger adult, 16-25 years of age. Older adult needs were to be met by continuing education programs. These programs attempted to link together, the adult, the community and the university (Kasworm, 1980).

Higher education for adults is based on the following beliefs:

1. Adults are capable, motivated learners.

2. Off-main-campus and nontraditional classroom settings can provide effective learning experiences.

3. University resources can be relevant to adult and community needs.

4. Teaching-learning strategies which recognize the unique characteristics of adults are required. These strategies incorporate variable access and time frame flexibility.

5. Adult students are necessary and important to colleges and the public. (Knowles, 1980).

Not all educators agree with these statements, as common misunderstandings are associated with nontraditional students. Kasworm (1980) noted some university faculty suspected that older students were not as qualified for undergraduate education due to age, time lapse from learning activities, or declining intellectual abilities. These suspicions are not supported by research. In fact, research contradicts these beliefs.

The reality is that adult students in higher education study more hours per week than do traditional students (Iovacchini, Hall & Hengstler, 1985). This is evidenced when grade point averages of younger and older students in the same undergraduate degree programs were compared (Halftner, 1962). GPA's of older students were significantly higher than the young students in total performance. These findings were corroborated by Ryan (1972) and Darkenwald and Novak (1997), who also found a positive relationship between age and levels of achievement.

Miller (1989) and Nordstrom (1989) reported that nontraditional students are more internally motivated to learn, prefer informal learning, and are more goal-directed than traditional students. Older students appear to have "a motivation, an excitement, and a love of learning" (Bishop-Clark & Lynch, 1992, p. 114). This may explain why nontraditional students are more prompt and regular in class atten-

dance (Glass & Rose, 1987) and why they perceive the classroom environment more favorably than traditional students (Stage & McCaffery, 1992).

Faculty who work with older students perceive them as more motivated, pragmatic, self-directed, goal oriented, and competent than traditional students (Beder & Darkenwald, 1982; Bodensteiner, 1985; Pew Charitable Trust, 1990; Raven & Jimmerson, 1992). Jacobs (1989) reported that nontraditional students were viewed as her "best students" as "they responded, reacted, opined, and participated in the process of education" (p. 329). However, not everyone views them as a positive force in the classroom, as some students on a college campus referred to adult students as "DAR's—Damned Average Raisers" (Jacobs, 1989, p. 331). Interestingly, while some studies show that faculty members perceive differences between nontraditional and traditional students (Sisco, 1981; Swift & Heinrichs, 1987; Pew Charitable Trust, 1990; Raven & Jimmerson, 1992), other studies indicate faculty often feel there is no need to teach older students differently from younger students and do not alter their methods of teaching (Galerstein & Chandler, 1982; Conti, 1985; Gorham, 1985). This implies that although instructors find the nontraditional group better students, they often do not change their teaching to a style which may benefit adults' learning.

The opinion that teaching adult students is different from teaching children is based on a principle called andragogy (Knowles, 1980). Andragogy was a word created by European educators, who saw the need for a model for adult learners that was distinctive from pedagogy. Pedagogy refers to the art and science of teaching children, while andragogy refers to the art and science of teaching adults. Assumptions regarding adult that are central to the andragogy model include that:

1. Learners' self-concept moves from being a dependent personality toward being a self-directed human being.

2. Learners' accumulate a growing reservoir of experience that becomes an increasingly rich source of learning.

3. Learners' readiness to learn becomes oriented increasingly to the developmental tasks for their social roles.

4. Learners' time perspective changes from one of personal application of knowledge to immediacy of application, and accordingly, their orientation toward learning shifts from one of subject centeredness to one of performance centeredness.

5. Learners' are motivated to learn by internal factors rather than external ones (Knowles, 1985).

Andragogy suggests a teachers' role which is more responsive and less directive. The model encourages self-directed learning at high levels. The adult student should have input regarding content, methodology, learning assessment techniques, etc. (Gorham, 1982). Further, Beder and Darkenwald (1982) cited eight differences in teaching adults as opposed to teaching their younger counterparts. They include: a) greater use of group discussion; b) less time spent on classroom discipline; c) more variety of teaching technique; d) less time spent on giving directions; e) more relating of material to life experiences; f) more flexible instructional activities; g) more adjustments made in instructional content in response to student feedback; and h) less emotional support provided to individual students.

Additional research on nontraditional students in colleges and universities appears to support many of the andragogical principles. Several researchers (Kasworm, 1980; Backus, 1984; Birkey, 1984) found that older students indicated stronger preferences for dealing with theoretical problems and concerns and greater capacity for critical thinking during problem solving. They are more likely to initiate interaction with the college instructor (Gorham, 1985; Bishop-Clark & Lynch, 1992) and less likely to blindly accept information without challenge (Richter-Antion, 1986). Loesche and Foley (1988) reported that nontraditional students prefer to organize their own learning experiences, while younger students indicated a preference for more teacher directed experiences. Adult students identified characteristics of effective instructors who use student centered experiences. These include: a) relevance of material, b) encouraging participation, c) being open to questions, and d) showing concern for student learning (Donaldson, Flannery, & Ross-Gordon, 1993). Older students also prefer realistic, tangible learning situations (Holtzclaws, 1980), hands-on practical examples and discussion (Bishop-Clark & Lynch, 1992) and problem-based learning (Fiddler & Knoll, 1995).

In a 1994 study, Richardson that found adult students use what he calls a "deep approach or a meaning orientation" (p. 318) towards coursework. This is in contrast to the traditional student who employs a "surface approach or a reproducing orientation". Richardson (1994) explains this phenomena by pointing out that nontraditional students are more motivated by intrinsic goals. Their prior life experiences help promote the "deep approach" towards course work. In contrast, the younger students develop a "surface approach" to learning while in high school and evidently carry this trait forward in higher education.

Conclusions

As can be seen, there are numerous differences between traditional and nontraditional students. Further while nontraditional students show similar problems to traditional students regarding lack of time for course work, older students apparently experience more role diffusion and time constraints due to family and job situations.

Those who work with both traditional and nontraditional students may want to examine what is currently being done to accommodate the needs of both age groups. Changes may need to be made to ensure that all individual needs are being met. Many articles written on nontraditional students focus on changes involving support services (e.g. Brenden, 1986; Scholssberg, Lynch & Chickering, 1991; Bova & Phillips, 1984; Rawlins & Lenihan, 1982; Villella & Hu, 1991, Vanderpool & Brown, 1994). While these components may be necessary in accommodating adult learners, little attention has been given to modifying how course content is delivered. Instructors of older students need to contemplate the theories of adult learning and incorporate these

elements in their classrooms. They should include more group discussions and offer a variety of assignments from which students can choose. Additionally, research needs to be undertaken to further investigate strategies that will aid in the knowledge development of nontraditional individuals in higher education.

This does not imply that the needs of the traditional-aged individual be forgotten. Flexibility seems to be a recurrent theme in trying to achieve maximum learning for all students in higher education. Perhaps analyzing the four teaching strategies that have been identified by Bishop-Clark and Lynch (1992) in creating a conducive learning environment for nontraditional and traditional students will aid us in this growth. These were: developing more personal contact with students; allowing students to discuss differences between traditional and nontraditional students; becoming equitable in how each group is approached; and increasing awareness of student similarities regardless of age.

As older students continue to enter the "ivory tower", we, in higher education, should commit ourselves to understanding and modifying existing conditions to better serve all students across all ages. The university is in part a business structure. As a business, we should be serving all our customers to the best of our ability.

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