

A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE: THE NEEDS OF NONTRADITIONAL STUDENTS IN POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION

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Nontraditional students, or adult learners, are the new majority in the classroom in any sector of higher education according to the National Center for Education Statistics. These students are considered nontraditional if they identify with at least one of the following criteria: be at least 25 years old, attend school part-time, work full-time, be a veteran, have children, wait at least one year after high school before entering college, have a GED instead of a high school diploma, being a first-generation student (FGS), are enrolled in nondegree programs, or have reentered a college program. This population also tends to be predominantly female. As this population trend grows exponentially in higher education, it is imperative for administrators and instructors to learn how to work with these students, as they deal with far different struggles to stay in school than their traditional counterparts. This review of the current literature will explore the best practices for what nontraditional students need based on the varied issues they face in reentering a classroom. A lack of knowledge about this population has led to low enrollment rates and high attrition rates, leaving some schools especially in the for-profit sector, struggling to stay afloat. It is imperative that as populations shift, so do pedagogical and supportive approaches within postsecondary institutions in order to retain these students and ensure their academic success.

Introduction

Gazing out over a classroom full of undergraduate students, professors are no longer looking at a room filled with 18-year-olds fresh out of high school who have moved into a dormitory on campus, do not work and have all of their time to dedicate to their studies. Instead, predominantly female older students who have not been enrolled in school in at least a year, who have children, and are working and running their own homes are filling postsecondary seats across the United States (Copper, 2017). These nontraditional students have significantly different needs to succeed in school than their traditional counterparts and they are enrolling in all types of institutions (NODA, 2017). According to a 2012 study, 14% of nontraditional students are enrolled in community colleges, with 10% attending public four-year colleges, 8% attending private four-year colleges, 2% attending four-year programs at for-profit institutions and 1% attending courses for one year or less at for-profit institutions (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). Because these students are in every type of postsecondary classroom, administrators and instructors must understand these students' needs in order to implement better systems and pedagogical techniques in order to help these students succeed and graduate (NODA, 2017). With 67% of nontraditional students dropping out of college before receiving a degree, it is imperative to understand the current literature to improve student outcomes (New, 2014; Garcia, 2015).

The Growing Population

Since 2006, the face of the collegiate population has changed significantly (Anderson, 2016). Though the number of traditional students enrolled in higher education has grown to a higher rate, the percentage of nontraditional students is expected to grow faster (Anderson, 2016). Also known as adult learners, nontraditional students account for more than 71% of students enrolled in all of higher education ("Characteristics," 2017; Sheehy, 2013). In 2013, 12 million nontraditional students were enrolled in higher education, and this is projected to rise 14% to 14 million students by 2024 (National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 2016a). In the for-profit sector

alone, nontraditional students account for an average of 78% of those enrolled (Arbeit & Horn, 2017). As of 2014, 1.3 million students were enrolled in for-profit schools, an increase from 200,000 students in 1990 (NCES, 2016b). Enrollment for this sector increased 217% from 2000 to 2014 where enrollment growths of adult learners in the public and private nonprofit institutions are projected at 26% and 25%, respectively (NCES, 2016b). To be considered an adult learner, a student would have to identify with at least one of the following criteria: be at least 25 years old, attend school part-time, work full-time, be a veteran, have children, wait at least one year after high school before entering college, have a GED instead of a high school diploma, be a first-generation student (FGS), be enrolled in non-degree programs, or have reentered a college program (NODA, 2017; Ross-Gordon, 2011). Statistically, most of these students are also female, though gender is not a qualifying criteria (NODA, 2017; Ross-Gordon, 2011).

Nontraditional Student Issues

Because these students are older and typically balancing jobs, families, and school, they face different issues than their traditional counterparts (Bidwell, 2014). Time management is a significant issue for adult learners as they struggle to find a balance between maintaining their family and financial obligations while still performing well in school (Ross-Gordon, 2011). Only about 18% of adult learners do not work while they are in school (Ross-Gordon, 2011). In 2012, the Lumina Foundation found family and work responsibilities the two highest-rated barriers for adult learners to return to the classroom (Erisman & Steele, 2012). Every adult student surveyed said these responsibilities, including child care, finances, health issues, and transportation, were substantial hurdles to returning to school (Erisman & Steele, 2012).

Academically, given their length of time out of school, most adult learners struggle with transitioning back into the classroom facing problems with skills like notetaking, test taking, reading textbooks, time management, and teacher expectations (Higgins, 2010; Ross-Gordon, 2011). Some have never encountered a syllabus, nor have they ever been taught how to

create academic structure for themselves, upon which they thrive (Bidwell, 2014; Peters, Hyun, Taylor, & Varney, 2010). Many students faced significant challenges with foundational writing and math skills that they would need for the duration of their programs (Erisman & Steele, 2012). Additionally, technology can be intimidating to many of them, especially if it is not something used in their daily lives (Bell, 2012; Regier, 2014).

Finally, adult learners' anxieties can be their biggest battle. More than half of students surveyed in a study by the Lumina Foundation said fear kept them from even trying to return to school (Erisman & Steele, 2012). Once classes have started, many experience various anxieties related to the classroom like attending classes with younger students, guilt over missing events in their family's lives, selfishness, and low self-esteem (Erisman & Steele, 2012; Perna, 2016). For FGSs, who are the first in their family to attend college, many feel misunderstood at home because relatives do not understand what they are going through, they do not know how to balance everything, and they feel unsupported (Perna, 2016). Not addressing these issues leads nearly 70% of nontraditional students to drop out of school, some within four short months (Deming, Goldin, & Katz, 2013; New, 2014).

What Nontraditional Students Need

Adult learners typically cannot alter their lives to fit some schools' fixed schedules so they prefer to find institutions where the programs, services, extracurriculars, and employees can adjust to their lives.

EARLY INTERVENTION

Nearly half of the adult students who enter college need remediation in some form and providing this to students immediately upon their arrival reduces their anxieties, fears, and chances of dropping out (Bigger, 2005; Oudenhoven, 2002). Mandatory freshman seminar courses have been on the rise at colleges and universities across the country because of their success (Keup, 2012). Approximately 94% of all postsecondary schools offer a seminar course (Keup, 2012). Because these class sizes are smaller and offer students strategies for coping with academic and personal issues, as well as

foundational skills in technology and writing, students significantly benefit from these courses (Keup, 2012). They are found to be most beneficial when offered as mandatory three-credit courses in addition to other foundational courses because the students then have adequate time in the course and to work through issues as they occur during the semester in their other courses (Cuseo, n.d.). Typically, nontraditional learners will take advantage of opportunities given to them but are far less likely to ask for the help, even if the support is there (Metzner & Bean, 1987). Nontraditional students who are ill-prepared for a collegiate atmosphere or who have never had to navigate within one, are more likely to drop out without these fundamental skills (Metzner & Bean, 1987).

FLEXIBILITY

Since nontraditional students began appearing on researchers' radar, course flexibility has ranked near if not at the top of these students' needs (Berling, 2013). Schools that offer evening, weekend, and online courses; shorter programs with only necessary courses that get learners into the workforce faster; credits for courses the student has already taken; and are geographically close to the student are more appealing to adult learners (Berling, 2013). Fifty% of students rated transfer credits very important to school selection while almost 75% felt flexible schedules were very important to them (Erisman & Steele, 2012). Schools that also offer some kind of child care programs and transportation assistance for its students are far more popular among adult learners, as this eases a nontraditional students' external pressures (Erisman & Steele, 2012).

DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION

For nontraditional students, instructors must move away from traditional didactic instruction and instead facilitate student empowerment within the classroom by allowing them to make decisions, changing the classroom design, and incorporating more reflective writing (Ishler, 2003). Instructors must treat these students as co-learners and create a personal connection with the student (Donnelly-Smith, 2011). Enabling the student to not only be the learner but the teacher in situations draws positive attention to their

experiences and education (Donnelly-Smith, 2011). Nontraditional students learn best by combining not only the course material but the learner's beliefs and practical applications of the material (NHI, n.d.). These students are different from traditional students because they bring with them more life experience and self-awareness to the classroom and when these are incorporated into the new material, students will be more invested and learn better (NHI, n.d.). Because these students care about how they will practically use course material, and learn best by being involved with the material, role playing, discussions, observations and chances for hands-on applications benefit these students best (Vandenberg, 2012). Nontraditional students respond better when instructors make their expectations very clear from the beginning of a course and provide both formal and informal feedback on assignments and their daily progress (Berling, 2013; Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, & Gonyea, 2008). Implementing all of these strategies creates a positive learning experience for the student and a strong rapport with the instructor which can foster a lifelong love of learning, which results in retention, persistence, and completion (Ishler, 2003).

INSTRUCTOR SUPPORT

Having a strong connection with instructors and a school's facilities are vital for a nontraditional student's success (Erisman & Steele, 2012). When students felt personal connections with instructors, they were more motivated, held more accountable, and felt more invested in the school (Metzner & Bean, 1987). Adult learners already have a lot of external motivators for doing well in school such as having a better career or more money (Chao, 2009). Nontraditional students are also motivated to inspire their children to work hard, not quit, and love learning; others want to provide better lives for their families; while still others also want to be better examples for their children than they had in their own upbringing, potentially breaking unsuccessful cycles of behavior (Strang, 2014). Though these are strong motivators for adult learners, these students already have a developed self-concept and at times can lack positive internal motivation for school (Chao, 2009). Negative past experiences with school or a particular subject can cre-

ate barriers for the student, thus an instructor must provide far more positive, extrinsic motivation on a continuous basis for it to eventually reset these students' intrinsic motivations (Chao, 2009). Studies have shown significant effects on nontraditional learners that positive, frequent involvement from instructors and advisers has on student self-efficacy, perception, satisfaction, motivation to learn, and thus retention (Burt, Young-Jones, Yadon, & Carr, 2013). Instructors knowing their students' names, remembering personal details about their students, taking an active role in caring for their students' success and relating to them personally enhanced student satisfaction in the classroom (Burt et al., 2013). Every adult student surveyed by the Lumina Foundation reported that academic advising was important to them (Erisman & Steele, 2012). Adult learners lose initial motivation and excitement quickly with any kind of setback, regardless of how minute it may seem, due to their past and emotional vulnerability (Lawrence, 2000). Providing students with structure, specific learning objectives, immediate feedback, constant access to their grades and records, learning students' temperaments, and beginning assessments graded based on effort rather than correctness are ways to build student motivation, lessen their anxiety, and help them persist (Lawrence, 2000). Instructors utilizing positive extrinsic motivation like exhibiting signs of pride, belief in their abilities, encouragement, care, interest in their lives, and positive feedback increases an adult learner's sense of investment and value in their school and education (O'Neill & Thomson, 2013). Faculty-student relationships are pivotal to adult learners' success (O'Neill & Thomson, 2013).

Discussion

Nontraditional students enrolled in postsecondary programs undoubtedly need support, guidance, and patience from not only those in their personal lives but primarily those in their academic lives. Part of the responsibility instructors and schools face in enrolling large populations of adult learners is not only teaching the students how to persist and succeed, but to first understand themselves what the students' deficits and challenges are. Providing these students with proper tools and strategies can result in students staying in

school, graduating, graduating faster, and becoming productive, skilled members of the workforce.

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