A New Approach: Designing Educational Opportunities that Accommodate and Support the Changing Student Demographic.
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Abstract:

Colleges across the country are experiencing a shift in demographic related to student population representation. The "traditional" student that institutions of higher education have known and understood for decades is no longer signifying the majority of students represented in most student populations. The adult learner is fast becoming the "new-traditional" student at many institutions of higher education. In order for the adult learner to be truly successful and for institutions to appeal to a demographic that they have not primarily targeted in the past a solid understanding of the needs of this demographic must be actively sought. Within this practice brief the needs and desires of the adult learner will be discussed, however this understanding on its own will not ensure student success. Institutions must re-evaluate the way that they currently offer classes, they must analyze the relevancy of their curriculum inclusion, and they need to reconsider procedures related to scheduling and educational learning opportunity. Understanding the needs of the adult learner and actively trying to implement methods to accommodate this demographic has the potential to increase enrollment at many institutions of higher education while also helping to contribute to the success of the adult learner students who enroll.

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In recent years as demographic shift has begun to reveal itself within student populations at many institutions of higher education across the country. This adult learner population is on the rise and proving itself to be a very well represented group that deserves to be sought, desired, and accommodated at all institutions of higher education. In some cases the adult learner actually represents a majority within student populations at many institution and this is the case within the student population that represents the program I currently teach in. According to an article titled Research on Adult Learners: Supporting the Needs of a Student Population that is No Longer Nontraditional by Jovita M. Ross-Gordon "a full 73% of students enrolled in higher education institutions could be classified as being nontraditional" (Ross-Gordon, J.M., 2011, p 1). It is clear that this demographic population is very important to the future of institutions of higher education. Attracting these individuals to our institutions, getting them enrolled consistently, developing educational opportunities that prove to be appealing or accommodating to this demographic, and helping them become successful in their educational pursuits should be a desire and the drive of every institution of higher education.

Problem Statement:

The adult learner has needs that go beyond that of the traditional student that colleges have learned to know very well over the last several decades. It has been my observation that institutions do a great job of serving the students that they know, the problem is that the traditional student that institutions have gotten to know and serve well for years is not representing the majority within most student populations. The new majority at many

institutions is being represented by the adult learner. I fear that if institutions and their administrations are not accurately informed on the needs that the adult learner demographic requires these students will have a greater chance of falling short if their educational goals because accommodations were not made and needs were not recognized for these individuals. The needs of the adult learner have the potential to have serious impact on a student's success as they pursue their educational goals. Institutions must take note of these needs and start to consider altering when educational opportunities are offered, how they are offer educational opportunities, and what is actually being offered. In order to do this effectively, institutions need to understand this demographic better. Taking time to get to get to know this demographic will reveal the desires that these students have with regard to necessity, convenience, accommodation, and learning preference, for example; when examining adult learning theory we find six conditions under which adults learn best (we will list and discuss these six conditions later in the paper). Knowing this criteria could prove to be extremely beneficial when attempting to tailor an educational approach that promotes interest and ensures success. Institutions must truly understand what characteristics that define this demographic. They must realize that the adult learner has responsibilities related to family and supporting that family that have to be considered when developing curriculum and scheduling educational offerings so that these individuals can still support those who depend on them while still being able to have success in pursuing their education.

Purpose Statement:

The purpose of this paper is to raise the awareness and importance of the adult learner within student populations across the nation by informing administrators, deans, department

chairs, recruiters, and marketing personnel of the relevance of this demographic. These individuals must also understand that the adult learner has certain accommodations and conveniences that they require in order to have the most success possible in their educational endeavors. It is up to the administrative teams, deans, and department chairs to support the efforts necessary to offer educational opportunities that accommodate the adult learner, and it is up to the recruiters and marketing department to inform the public of these actions in an effort to boost enrollment.

Approaches to Supporting Adult Learners:

"Ask most people to describe the typical college student and you'll probably hear something about a recent high school graduate, someone in their early 20's who lives on or close to campus, and whose life is a mix of daytime classes and campus social activities" (Bell, 2012, p. 1). While many may agree with the previous statement "the reality is that the traditional 18-22 year old student is now the minority in higher education" (Bell, 2012, p. 1). When we look at the population represented by the adult learner a little closer we find that "38% of those enrolled in higher education are over age 25 and one-fourth are over the age of 30. The share of all students who are over age 25 is projected to increase another twenty-three percent by 2019" (Hess, 2011, p. 2). Clearly, this trend is relevant and is predicted to increase as we move into the future

Many studies with regard to the adult learner and adult learning preference have been done over the years and as we continue to examine adult learning theory throughout this practice brief, we find six conditions under which adults learn best. They are as follows:

1. Adults feel a need to learn and have input into the what, why, and how they will learn.

2. The learning situation relates to past experiences, and these experiences are used as a resource for learning.

3. What is to be learned relates to the adult's developmental changes.

4. Adults' learning styles are taken into account.

5. The learning environment is non-threatening and encourages freedom to experiment and take risks.

6. The learner's ability to take risks is compatible with the type of learning situation.

(NWREL, 1999, cited in Donovan, J., 2014, p. 3).

The adult learner has a desire for convenience in their pursuit of higher education. Responsibilities typically observed by adult learners in terms of family commitment and necessity to work to support their families can be a huge stumbling blocks in reaching educational goals. Convenience can help alleviate these obstacles. The needs and desires of the adult learner, or any learner for that matter, are never static and are continually evolving. "Due to student development theory's evolving nature, required updating and intelligent use is not reason to dismiss it but an indication of its relevance" (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, Renn, 2010, p. 39).

Following are several strategies that can be implemented to support the needs of adult learners and help them be successful, they are as follows:

1. Prior Learning Assessment – This process would allow the institution, or a specific department within an institution, to evaluate experience and consider pre-attained attributes in the form of a placement type program within a specific educational endeavor. "Observers say prior learning's impact on higher education could be

enormous. Its potential could even rival that of online learning, by continuing to open student access beyond the campus" (Fain, 2012).

2. Offer Credit for Prior Learning and or Experience – According to Cooper (2008) many undergraduate completion programs geared towards nontraditional students also emphasize the different ways students can earn course credit. If an institution does offer any type of credit for prior learning, accepts CLEP credit or military credits, this should be emphasized in all marketing materials. This will help students upfront as they prepare their program schedules (p. 2).

3. Ease Transfer Credit Process – Many colleges assume that applicants know about transfer credit and therefor do not emphasize this option in their marketing materials or limit their recruiting of transfer students to attendance at community college transfer fairs. The college and university dropout rates however demonstrate that there is a large population of adults who have some earned postsecondary credit and cannot be found on community college campuses (Cooper, 2008, p. 2).

4. Adopt Flexible Schedules and Policies – Institutions must adopt policies and procedures to address the special needs of nontraditional students. Nontraditional students represent a broad range of age groups; therefore, institutions need to be prepared to work with students who are having children, going through long-term illness, going on military leave, getting married, and experiencing other important life events. If students need to take a semester off, this process should be easy to understand and explained to the students at the beginning of the program. While allowing students the ability to take time off without penalty is key, it is also

important to establish deadlines and regularly check-in with students who are on leave (Cooper, 2008, p. 3).

5. Accelerated Course Formats – "Courses, certificates, and degrees designed to be completed in a shorter time frame and in which either course duration or contact hours may be modified are learning formats that tend to be more responsive to adult learners' lives" (Wlodkowski, 2003, cited in Ross-Gordon, 2011, p. 4).

6. Offer Evening, Weekend, and Online Course Offerings – The most common—and simplest—strategy to increase postsecondary program flexibility is to change the time and/or location of course offerings. This approach addresses one of the most significant barriers working adults face in trying to access and complete credentialed educational programs—their lack of time. "Adult friendly" colleges offer courses when and where they are most convenient to adult students. This includes scheduling classes on weekends and at night, when day-shift workers are available" (Choitz, Prince, 2012, p. 10). These type of course offerings are very convenient for the adult learner. It allows them to take classes when they potentially have the time to actually do so. Evenings and weekends are typically times when most individuals could find some availability to participate, and online offerings allows individuals to totally take convenience into account.

7. Connect Faculty and Curriculum to the Workplace – "Scholars such as Malcom Knowles (1977) and Stephen Brookfield (2005) have indicated that creating environments that allow adult learners to share their experiences and apply what they

learn to their work or daily lives will help to drive the learning process" (Cooper, 2008, p. 2).

8. Offer Career Counseling Services – Providing resources that will assist students and graduates with resume writing, interviewing and strategies to assist with the job search is an important factor for nontraditional students; therefore, it is important to emphasize these resources to prospective students. Career counselors can also help make inroads with the local community by helping to organizing job fairs, work with local businesses to develop internship opportunities (Cooper, 2008, p. 2).

9. Schedule Regular Advising Sessions – "It is important to build a contact schedule with nontraditional students. Establishing personal contact will help make students feel secure and welcome at your institution" (Cooper, 2008, p. 3).

10. Include Nontraditional Students in the Institutions Mission – "If attracting nontraditional students to your is your goal, the success of meeting this goal will depend on whether or not this student population is represented throughout the university and included within the overall mission of the institution" (Cooper, 2008, p. 3).

When properly integrated, all of these strategies should definitely go a long way in serving to support the needs of the adult learner based on current knowledge of how institutions can contribute to student success in their continued development.

Challenges:

For every supporter of the ideas and plans outlined in this paper there will be people who oppose these thought processes. Re-branding and re-developing institutions and their processes for offering quality educations can be a very labor intensive project, not to mention the expense that is tied to an undertaking of this magnitude. Some will feel that the bread and butter of the institution is the focus on the traditional student who has got us this far and helped to develop the reputation as it currently stands, while others realize that attendance in institutions of higher education is down across the country. Marketing to a new demographic makes sense in terms of increasing enrollment for the institution, yet some will still have a hard time buying into the implementation of the educational plans that have to be developed in order to draw the adult learner. We are in a time of workforce transition as a nation. The baby boomers will be exiting the workforce at an alarming rate over the next several years. This could leave nearly a 75 million position gap to fill within a multitude of industries across the country. We are currently at a point where many of these individuals are still gainfully employed and have a lot of influence. The lack of time that these individuals have remaining in the workforce and their unwillingness to conform to new ways of doing things could contribute to the resistance to a plan like the one that is discussed in this paper.

Conclusion:

The demographic of the adult learner is and will continue to be of extreme value to institutions of higher education for years to come. This demographic has many specific needs that characterize who they are and how they can approach their education. Colleges need to become familiar with these needs so that the learning experience can be one that is very productive for these individuals because what little time they have to dedicate to their education

is very valuable to them and they do not want to waste it. Finding ways to make education more accommodating and convenient for these individuals will help them be successful in their educational pursuits. Designing curriculums and programs that cater to this demographic should also be something that draws more people from this demographic to various institutions because students will see what has been put in place and it will give the students comfort in knowing that the institution cares enough about their success to have taken such steps. I see absolutely no downside for institutions who try to accommodate the adult learner.

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