Not Non-traditional, the New Normal: Adult Learners and the Role of Student Affairs in Supporting Older College Students

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Abstract

The higher education student population is consistently shifting. The financially dependent, 18-year-old high school graduate who enrolls full-time is not the "typical college student." College has increasingly become the pursuit of older students seeking or returning to secure postsecondary credentials and degrees. The author argues that the growing adult student population must be better recognized and prioritized in student affairs to increase access, outcomes, and effectiveness for adult learners. Accordingly, the author highlights the unique and complex profiles of adult learners while also putting forth new directions for improving conditions for adult learners through student affairs practice. In particular, this text addresses the role of institutional research and non-deficit language and practices in student affairs to cultivate supportive and thriving educational spaces for adult learners. Ultimately, this text highlights how radical shifts and changes to our postsecondary education landscape require new and inclusive ways of practice and improving student conditions.

Keywords: adult learners, emerging trends, higher education, higher education practice, nontraditional students, postsecondary education, student affairs

Much of what we know about student affairs practice is largely a result of a focus and research on traditionally-aged college students. While these efforts have provided substantial information to guide the field of higher education, they are inherently limited by their intentional and narrow focus on younger student populations with traditional trajectories. I argue that a continued focus on "traditionally" aged students will only cripple our ability to advance 21st century higher education practice. This text underscores the importance of a student affairs profession that is attentive to the changing landscape of higher education in general, and the growing number of adult students entering college in particular.

Student Affairs and the Changing Student Landscape

If achievement, satisfaction, persistence, and learning are a priority in postsecondary education, institutions of higher learning must have student affairs professionals whose contributions complement and help an institution realize its goals (Whit, 2005). The underlying fundamental mission of student affairs is to serve; the profession exists to ensure that students are safe, cared for, well treated, and (more or less) satisfied with their higher education (Long, 2012). With the growing diversity of the 21st century higher education student population, student affairs professionals and colleges are facing greater challenges in providing multidimensional programs and services necessary for expansive student success and satisfaction (Wang, 2013).

Specifically, many colleges and universities have struggled to adapt to this changing student marketplace, often finding themselves burdened by traditions and practices that prove ill-suited for older students (Council for Adult and Experiential Learning, 2000). Adult learners

are largely invisible to higher education (Coulter & Mandell, 2012). An American Council for Education (ACE) survey found that more than 40% of institutions indicated that they "did not identify older adult students for purposes of outreach, programs and services, or financial aid" (Lakin, 2009). When they do, the prevailing view of adult learners is that they are "one-dimensional" (Lakin, 2009) and focused predominantly on lifelong learning. Overall, there is a paucity of research and data on adult learners (Cruce & Hillman, 2012) and what has been conducted has mainly been descriptive analyses in policy reports (Irvine & Kevan, 2017). Between 1990 and 2003, only one percent of articles in seven widely circulated peer-reviewed higher education journals focused on adult learners (Donaldson & Townsend, 2007). Understanding the unique needs of adult learners is critical to designing higher education systems, practices, and policies that support this population and promote their success.

The Post-Traditional Student Population

Adult learners are part of a growing "post-traditional" student population, usually defined as aged 25 and over, but also include those under 25 who have characteristics indicative of adult responsibilities, such as working full-time, being financially independent, having non-spousal dependents, being a single parent, as well as having a nontraditional educational trajectory, such as delayed enrollment into higher education or did not complete high school (Chen, 2017; Soares, 2013). By many measures these "non-traditional" students have become the norm in postsecondary education (Carnevale, Smith, Melton, & Price, 2015; Westervelt, 2016). A key characteristic distinguishing post-traditional from other college students is the high likelihood that they are juggling other life roles while attending school, including those of worker, spouse or partner, parent, caregiver, and community member (Ross-Gordon, 2011). More often, these multiple roles present challenges in students' allocation of time for both academic study and participation in campus-based organizations and activities (Ross-Gordon, 2011).

Adult Learners

Every time we call college students 'kids,' we reinforce a subtle and problematic depiction. The minimized presence of adult learners is rooted in the historic youth-centered focus in postsecondary education (Chen, 2017). College is generally assumed to be a phase of life for young persons, and a milestone for those leaving adolescence and entering into young adulthood (Kasworm, 2005; Kasworm, 2010). Research on higher education has been predominantly based in historical perspectives, beliefs, and curriculum of a traditional student profile. This profile consists of persons between 18 and 22 years of age and who do not have other major responsibilities or roles that compete with their studies (e.g., full-time employment, parenting, and community responsibilities) (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Pascarella & Terenzini 2005). However, contemporary higher education reflects increasing diversity and distance from this traditional student profile. As a major grouping, adult students now comprise more than 38% of all students enrolled in higher education (National Student Clearinghouse, 2012).

Some argue that "adult students have particular characteristics that set them apart from nontraditional students" and these characteristics "deserve our attention and the recognition that these students are a distinct group" (Compton, Cox, & Laanan, 2006, pp. 73-74). In Compton et al.'s definition, adult students are 25 years old and older who are, "more likely to be pursuing a program leading to a vocational certificate or degree," "have focused goals for their education, typically to gain or enhance work skills," and "may consider themselves primarily workers and not students" (Compton, Cox, & Laanan, 2006, p. 74). While there are different definitions of nontraditional students, mature students, and adult students, all

three are commonly used to refer to "nontraditionally aged" students. Many of these students are participating in higher education primarily for career-related reasons while having other major responsibilities and roles (Iloh, 2017). Throughout this text, when I reference adult students, this indicates adults age 25 or older participating in higher education.

Adult students have unique needs, especially if they are employed. Among others, these needs include: different kinds of information about their educational options, institutional flexibility in curricular and support services, academic and motivational advising supportive of their life and career goals, recognition of experience, and learning that incorporates previous work experience (Council for Adult and Experiential Learning, 2000). Although more adults are enrolling in college, motivated primarily by their potential economic mobility, they must overcome the many economic, personal, interpersonal, community, and institutional challenges in their way. For these reasons, support for post-traditional students in college should be different than the support needed for traditional 18-24-year-olds who have entered higher education immediately after graduating from high school (Chen, 2017).

Using Institutional Research

It is important for student affairs professionals to use institutional research to understand and analyze student adult learner data in order to develop programs and support services. Specifically, student affairs practitioners at any institution can utilize enrollment data to understand trends in their student population as well as certain programs, practices, and efforts that can be scaled up or down, depending on the adult learner population. These practices are especially important for student affairs professionals that work at colleges that are underfunded and must be precise and efficient with every resource. Using institutional research to expand and restrict services, resources, and programs based on demands from adult learners will help institutions better structure the scarce resources, if any, that they are given towards supporting adult learners.

In addition to utilizing data that has already been collected, it will be important for practitioners to collect new information in relation to support and services for adult learners. This might include surveys and interviews to understand the experiences of students ages 25 and older. In some cases, practitioners might invest in understanding if their campus is perceived as accessible to adult learners. While institutions of higher learning may not have policies restricting adult learners from enrolling, the extent to which students feel welcome at that campus is an entirely different matter. Practitioners can utilize these interviews and other instruments to develop data-driven processes and practices to better attract, serve and support prospective and current adult learners on their campus.

Strength-based Approaches over Deficit Perspectives

Colleges and universities are not compromising their academic standards by being intentional about how they can better serve the adult learner population. Rather, it is an opportunity to illustrate their rigor and accessibility, which is a feat not all institutions of higher learning have taken on. In identifying students as adult learners, student affairs professionals have an opportunity to identify and celebrate the assets this population brings to an educational environment. As a result, students would be less likely to be treated less than or encouraged to assimilate to the approaches of their peers. Language plays an important role in restructuring how practitioners, adult learners, and other students, staff, and faculty view adult students (Iloh, 2017). Throughout this text, I refer to students typically labeled as "nontraditional" as "post-traditional", for categorical reasons, but also to challenge problematic terminology (Soares, 2013). The term "nontraditional student" is somewhat of a misnomer, as today's college

student population consists of many adult learners with jobs, families, and responsibilities outside of school (Education Advisory Board, 2016). The continued and frequent labeling of the majority of college students as nontraditional is a form of othering that adversely impacts these students' ability to successfully persist in many educational settings (Yancey Gulley, 2016). Using such language suggests, "We are going out on a limb by letting you attend college because this place is not really designed for you, and you really should not be here" (Yancey Gulley, 2016). Usage of the term nontraditional will not bring us closer to equity-minded and student-centered practices and instead, minoritizes one of the fastest growing student populations in higher education.

In addition to rethinking deficit language and terminology in student affairs practice, it is important to develop campus or online educational climates that honor adult learners as important agents that are changing the culture and mission of higher education for the better. Adult learners are forcing institutions of higher learning to develop practices that do not assume a one-size-fits-all approach is the best approach for students in postsecondary education. Adult learners bring a variety of rich experiences, knowledge, and communities to any educational environment (Ross-Gordon, 2011). On one hand, this could mean academic affairs professionals thinking more intently about curriculum that merges previous experience and advances the ideals of lifelong learning. On another hand, this might mean professionals making sure events for students, especially those events catered to students that often are not served adequately, also welcome their families or are considerate of part-time and full-time schedules. One-stop-shop academic and career counseling services will help ensure adult learners do not need to track down multiple campus resources while also helping campus services became more centralized and cohesive. As a field, large student affairs professional organizations such as NASPA and ACPA can also bring in specialists and students as guest speakers to educate student affairs professionals and scholars on necessary directions for adult learners. Measures such as these at the institutional and professional organization level are useful in ensuring professionals are embedded in ecosystems that support them as they seek to better support adult learners at their institutions.

Conclusion

Equity and excellence are often discussed as ideals and agendas of higher education, although in reality they are much harder to achieve in practice. Higher education cannot consider itself equitable or excellent if it fails to serve or address the presence and needs of the growing majority of 21st century college students. Adult learners represent not only the present, but future of higher education. Accordingly, this text highlights the immense opportunity for the student affairs profession to advance commitments of expansive excellence, through recognition, support, and strength-based solutions for adult learners.

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A Dual-Process Approach to Testing the Effectiveness of a Social Media Activism Workshop

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Abstract

Drawing from Hanasono and colleagues' (2016) dual process theory of message production and empirical research from student affairs and the communication discipline, this study introduces and tests an innovative social media activism workshop that aims to equip college students with the skills and motivation to use social media more strategically to challenge stereotypes, reduce prejudice, and promote diversity and inclusion. College students (N = 198) were organized into experimental and control groups; those in the experimental condition completed a 75-minute workshop that was strategically designed to enhance participants' motivation and skills to engage in anti-hate social media activism. The results indicated that college students who completed the workshop had significantly stronger social media activism skills than those in the control group and that these skills were predictive of individuals' ability to craft effective messages that persuaded others to take a stand against stereotyping and discrimination. In addition to extending the scope of the dual-process theory of message production into the realm of student affairs research, findings from this study support the continued creation and assessment of programming and interventions by student affairs practitioners that focus on (a) increasing individuals' appreciation of diversity and (b) developing strong social media activism skills to create a more positive online community for college students and university stakeholders.

Keywords: activism, diversity, dual-process, higher education, intervention, social media

Cyberbullying, the use of online communication and social media (SM) to promote repeated, hurtful behaviors by a group or individuals with the intent to harm others, remains a pervasive problem (González-Cabrera, Calvete, León-Meija, Pérez-Sancho, & Peinado, 2017), especially among millennials and students in higher education. Hinduja and Patchin (2015) reported that 34.4% of adolescents have experienced cyberbullying. Zalaquett and Catters (2014) found that nearly 20% of college students were victims of cyberbullying, and the Pew Research Center (2014) indicated that 44% of adult men and 37% of adult women have been the targets of online harassment.

In addition to diversity and inclusion programs and initiatives (e.g., Mercurio, 2009), students affairs staff and university members can engage in anti-hate social media activism to prevent and reduce the prevalence of cyberbullying and online harassment. Anti-hate social media activism – the use of social networking sites (SNS) to promote diversity and inclusion, challenge stereotypical thinking, and advocate against discrimination – allows people to seek and share information over vast geographical distances (Holten, Baek, Coddington, &