What College Presidents Need to Know About Adult Learners in Higher Education

David Deggs
Southern Methodist University

Correspondence related to this article should be directed to Dr. David Deggs, Executive Director of College Access Programs, Southern Methodist University, ddeggs@smu.edu

American higher education has undergone a metamorphosis over the past three decades that has resulted in the emergence of new paradigms for academic program content, modalities for instructional delivery, configuration and delivery of student services, and expansion of outreach models. Central to this metamorphosis is the adult learner in American higher education. Once thought to be the minority in American higher education, adult learners now comprise 74% of all undergraduate college students in the United States (Radford, Cominole & Skomsvold, 2015). This marked shift in the student demographics has caused many American higher education institutions to reconsider the mission, purpose and emphasis of higher education thus causing changes to the operational models that exist at many institutions. Efforts to modify traditional operational paradigms have often been through trial and error and arguably with limited insight into the true needs of the adult learner in American higher education. The result has been two ideologies of academic and student services, including those for traditional students and a separate one for adult learners. The result has been a bifurcated system that exists in many higher education institutions that is arguably ineffective when meeting student needs.

College presidents and senior leadership have an opportunity to vastly improve their institutions academic, student services, and outreach models by focusing on the needs of the adult learners in higher education today. An emphasis on the needs of adult learners has benefits for all students, including those students who appear to be traditional students by demographic attributes. Efforts by college presidents and senior leadership to focus on the needs of adult learners can yield to more relevant, impactful, cost effective and efficient academic, student services and outreach programs. Such efforts should be focused on understanding the demographic attributes of adult learners today, recognition and mitigation of barriers among adult learners, and understanding how students' community of origin supports or negates educational attainment.

Demographic Attributes of Adult Learners

As previously stated, 74% of undergraduates in American higher education have at least one nontraditional characteristic. Common nontraditional characteristics including independent student classification, having dependents, not holding a traditional high school diploma, delayed postsecondary enrollment, military service, and attending the institution less than fulltime (Radford, Cominole & Skomsvold, 2015). Although there has been constant growth in the number of adult learners in American higher education, researchers predict that the growth of adult learners will only continue. Specifically, data in Digest of Education Statistics 2015 indicated that the number of adult learners will increase another 18% between 2014 and 2025 (Snyder, de Brey, & Dillow, 2016). This continued transition toward more adult learners presents an opportunity for institutions to create innovative academic programs that address the personal

and career interests of students in an efficient and relevant manner. An awareness and appreciation for the complexity of the adult learner is necessary to create such programs that are responsive to the adult learner needs for personal and career needs. College presidents and senior leadership should be cautious that a one-size-fits-all approach cannot be applied to address the personal and careers needs of adult learners. Rather, programs that support less than fulltime enrollment, address needs of adult learners with military service experience, or that provide transitional support for students without a traditional high school diploma are examples of programs that have been vetted at other institutions. Refinement of such programs will be necessary to meet the emerging needs of adult learners as the population of adult learners continues to increase.

Recognition and Mitigation of Barriers

The field of adult learning and development has long recognized that distinct barriers exist that negate adult learners' abilities to access, engage in and benefit from education opportunities. Cross (1981) identified three specific barriers including institutional, situational and dispositional that impede adult learners' success in educational programs, including American higher education. Previous research has suggested that the American higher education system should seek to understand the complexity of the barriers that adult learners face when attempting to pursue educational opportunities. Specifically, the impact of these barriers on degree completion should be examined and thoroughly understood so that new systems of support could be created (Deggs, 2011).

While the identification of barriers is essential to creating a campus environment where adult learners feel supported, college presidents and senior leadership cannot control or mitigate all barriers to adult learners or other students for that matter. The institutional barriers, that are controlled by institutional policies, procedures, and practices, are essentially the easiest to manage. College presidents and senior leadership should carefully examine operational plans and be cognizant of student success metrics to identify and mitigate barriers.

Conversely, situational and dispositional are beyond the control of the institution and its leadership. Situation barriers are related to the adult learners' life circumstances (e.g. home, job) and dispositional barriers are often related to self-perceptions that adult learners have about themselves (Cross, 1981, p. 81). The ability of the higher education institution to mitigate these barriers is much less and higher education institutions should be careful to not attempt to seize control of these barriers. Doing so would rob the adult learner of important opportunities for personal growth and development. Higher education institutions under the leadership of presidents and senior leadership should seek to support adult learner personal growth and development in an effort to compliment learning outcomes. Support services should recognize such limitations of their role and should also recognize that the institution should not create barriers that further complicate the situational and dispositional barriers that adult learners experience.

Understanding the Influence of Community of Origin

Related to the understanding of situational and dispositional barriers is the influence of the adult learners' communities of origin. Communities of origin have a persona that develop entrenched values among the citizens within. These attributes of the community often account for strong cognitive, social and emotional ties that adult learners have with their communities (Deggs & Miller, 2011, 2018). An understanding of these embedded influencers in communities is necessary for college presidents and senior leadership to create appropriate support systems for adult learners. The negative messages of communities that tend to negate educational attainment must be counteracted in a manner that places value on self-actualization and educational attainment. The influences of community are often tied directly to the demographic attributes of adult learners (e.g. less than fulltime enrollment, having dependents, etc.) and the barriers that exists among adult learners specifically situational and dispositional barriers. Again, the institution and its senior leadership cannot resolve all these two types of barriers for adult learners in American higher education. College presidents and senior leadership can seek to create an environment where reflection, self-actualization, and interpersonal growth are encouraged, supported, and used as an opportunity to support personal and career growth. It is difficult to completely disassociate the adult learner from their community of origin and many adult learners will be at conflict with the differences between their community of origin and the newfound enlightenment that comes from participation in American higher education. College presidents and senior leadership should encourage faculty and staff to embrace and support the adult learners' reconciliation of these worlds as they undergo a transformative learning experience.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

College presidents and senior leadership have a prime opportunity to influence their institution's efforts to support adult learner academic and personal growth. While not all aspects of the adult learner's experience while in college are under the control of the institution, presidents and their senior leadership teams should make efforts to promote the development of a campus culture for adult learners that is conducive to personal growth and development.

The 10 Principles for Effectively Serving Adult Learners as developed by the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) provide a framework for beginning the conversation for campuses and for identifying key gaps in institutional operates that impact adult learner success (Council for Adult and Experiential Learning, n.d.). This framework can be used to bring attention to the needs of adult learners and allow for critical reflection of how to support emergence of new paradigms for academic program content, modalities for instructional delivery, configuration and delivery of student services, and expansion of outreach models.

Presidents and other senior leadership should challenge academic, student service and outreach units to re-conceptualize what is meant by adult learners on today's college campus. While most understand that age is no longer the defining characteristic to determine adult learner status, some still default to age as a simplistic mechanism to separate adult learners from traditional

students. This simplistic bifurcated separation of students into two groups is flawed. An intrinsic understanding of adult learners' accounts for the complexity of life roles (e.g. less than full time enrollment, nontraditional high school completion, having dependents, etc.) is essential to creating institutions that are focused on adult learner needs. Likewise, institutions must recognize that real barriers exist that often impede educational access and success and those barriers can stem from the community of origin. The institution should provide the supportive environment that empowers the adult learner to manage such barriers and support their transitions from their community of origin. College leadership should be careful to not shortchange the powerful experiences as overcoming these barriers and influences of community of origin. It is through managing these challenges that adult learners can develop grit and determination which is essential in supporting personal growth and career readiness.

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