

Engaging Adult Students

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Abstract

With the increase demand among adult students for baccalaureate degrees opposed to associate degrees, metropolitan universities are excellent educational options for these students to complete their educational goals due to the geographic proximity of these institutions to work and housing. Metropolitan campus administrators are increasingly focusing on issues related to adult student engagement, learning, and retention. To date, only a few studies exist that examine adult student engagement. Most of these studies focus on the community college experience. This article describes student engagement experiences of three African American adult students on two metropolitan campuses. The author offers five recommendations for campus administrators and faculty for enhancing adult student engagement.

The percentage of adult students who completed four or more years of college has increased by six percent since 1979 (Harvey, 2002). This increase in percentage of adult students obtaining baccalaureate degrees is equivalent across racial classifications. However, gender differences do exist. The rise in adult women attending four-year colleges constitutes the greatest gains in adult student enrollment. Women constitute 81 percent of adult students. This trend in educational attainment for women is similar across race except in the case of African Americans. The percentage of adult women versus men is slightly equivalent (African American females 52 percent, African American males 48 percent). As these trends related to educational attainment continue for adult students, university faculty and administrators will need to increase their understanding of how to increase student engagement in the academic and social culture of the university.

Previous literature suggests that adult students' college experience is different than their traditional age peers in respect to educational purpose and the role life changing events play in their reason for returning to college (Schossberg, 1984; Graham, 1998). Unlike traditional age undergraduate students, adult undergraduate students' decision to enroll in college is not motivated by societal and family views. However, their need for support of their academic goals and connection to the academic culture of the campus is similar. Practitioners in student affairs and higher education utilize different theories and models of college student development and learning to construct interventions and programs that promote student engagement. Unfortunately, there are very few theories in student affairs that focus specifically on the undergraduate adult student experiences that administrators and faculty use to assist them with addressing student engagement issues among this population in college. Most of our knowledge about adult student engagement in college has been generated from studies conducted at community colleges.

Compared to four-year colleges and universities, community colleges had higher adult student enrollment numbers and produced positive learning and graduation outcomes. These campuses have designed and implemented programs, services, and learning experiences that have increased adult students' level of campus engagement. College outcomes related to adult students attending four-year metropolitan campuses are underreported.

Due to geographic proximity to work and housing, metropolitan universities provide excellent opportunities for adult students aspiring to obtain baccalaureate degrees. Adult enrollment at metropolitan universities has increased over the last 20 years. This increase in adult students attending metropolitan universities has prompted university administrators to study the impact of their institution on adult enrollment, learning, retention, and graduation.

Student engagement is emerging as a key factor in the retention and satisfaction level of this diverse population of students. Arnold, Kuh, Vesper and Schuh (1993) site equally positive outcomes related to campus involvement for adult and traditional age students. Thus, the investigation of adult student engagement impact on adult student success and retention at metropolitan universities is imperative.

According to Heath (1991), "As we grow, we become increasingly more able to put our experience into some type of language." It is with this thought that this author invited three adult African American students pursuing baccalaureate degrees at two metropolitan universities in the Midwest to describe their experience related to student engagement. The following guided this study:

- What factors facilitated your decision to attend college?
- Describe your college experience.
- Describe your relationship and experiences with faculty, student, and administrators at your institution.

Method

Participants — Three African American participants were involved in this study. Two were female and one was male. Their ages at the time the study were, 23, 37, and 53. One of the participants recently graduated from a metropolitan university in the Midwest. The other two are presently attending a different Midwestern metropolitan university. The academic rank of these two returning adult students is junior and sophomore. Both institutions represented in this study are classified as doctoral degree-granting institutions.

Data collection and analysis — The author of this study treated each participant's interview as a single case study on his or her present or recent college experience at a metropolitan doctoral degree-granting institution in the Midwest. According to Patton (1980), researchers use interviews as a method of data collection in order to find out information about people that cannot be directly observed or to document behaviors that took place in the past. Much of what this study seeks to investigate can only be

discovered through students' account of past experiences that influenced their perception of college and level of engagement in college.

The case study paradigm legitimizes the meaningfulness of data reported on the three subjects in this study because the information generated from each participant provides insight on adult student engagement in college. Each case study also contributes information that can be used for generating hypothesis for the further study of adult student engagement at metropolitan universities.

A cross-case analysis approach was used to analyze the data. "An interpretation based on evidence from several cases can be more compelling to a reader than results based on a single incident" (Merriam, 1988). "Units of information" or sentences that revealed information on each participants' college experience was constructed and coded. Each code was analyzed and organized into themes related to student engagement.

Each participant was asked to review their transcribed interview and the final themes to verify the accuracy of the author's interpretation of the data. Two professional colleagues in higher education served as peer examiners.

Results

The following five themes emerged that described these three adult students' experiences related to higher education. Each theme reflects behaviors, incidents, and issues within the context of attending college.

Previous College Enrollment and Workforce Opportunity

Growing up also means deciding what is more and what is less important. . . It means accepting that we cannot be everything we would like to be (Heath, 1991).

Each of the participants in this study attended some form of higher education directly following high school. Their first attempt at earning a college degree was unsuccessful due to lack of focus or weak commitment to obtaining a college degree.

"Like most of my classmates, I enrolled in college three months after my high school graduation. My tenure and my enthusiasm were short-lived. I lasted just two short, unproductive years."

The reasons these students went to college immediately after high school were externally motivated. Family expectations and educational background represented the strongest external factor motivating these students' earlier attempt at higher education. Interestingly, higher education's potential impact on their economic advancement and workforce preparation was not cited as a factor influencing their desire to obtain a college degree during their first attempt at college. However, economic advancement and workforce preparation was the primary factor for returning to college as adults.

“The primary factor [influencing my decision to return to college] was coming to the realization that even at my age, I had to come up with a plan to both become more competitive, as well as make myself more marketable in today’s job market that has become virtually inundated with youth.”

Age and movement from being externally to internally motivated to attend college was reflected in each of the student interviews.

Family Responsibilities

Few career mothers do not suffer a conflict between their calling to be a good mother and their desire to be a good worker (Heath, 1991).

Participants in this study not only desired to change their economic circumstance through education but their families’ as well.

“I wanted my son to realize the difference my education would make in our economic situation.”

Regardless of each participant’s parental or marital status, they describe how family impacted the choices they made about college or the extent of their engagement in college.

“My wife passed away a little over three years ago. I felt a great sense of loss and felt a compulsion to get away.”

The death of the spouse of one of the participants impacted his decision to attend a metropolitan university in a neighboring city. The other two participants cited parenting responsibilities as a life experience that dictates how engaged they could be outside of attending classes and their level of interaction with other students.

“My only hindrance to participation was those activities that interfered with my family time.”

One participant felt so intensely about how her parenting responsibilities impact on her feelings of connection to other students that she cried during the interview:

“Being a single parent makes me different. My role and experiences are different. We [adult students and those considered traditional age college students] are from two different worlds.”

Perceived Receptivity of Campus Administrators and Faculty

“The things that go right in our lives do predict future successes and the events that go wrong in our lives do not forever damn us” (Heath, 1991, p. 115).

In each case, age oppose to race was a more salient characteristic influencing these students experience. All of the adult students in this study felt that faculty and administrators needed to do more to encourage adult students to engage in campus life.

“I felt as though I had to really assert myself to be taken seriously. I had to battle against a host of preconceived notions [by faculty and administrators who] seemed to believe that older students were here because they were bored with life, had nothing better to do, or to train for a job and had no particular emotional attachments to the school.”

The adult students in this study felt that campus-wide involvement opportunities for adult students were limited. Additionally, participants felt that more adults would participate in campus life if faculty and administrators communicate to them that they view them as an asset and would like to see them more involved in certain activities. Fortunately, these adult students felt very positive about their relationship with their traditional age peers in part because perceived themselves as role models for these students.

Purposeful Involvement

Heath (1991) wrote: “Success isn’t just a matter of luck, family privilege, or society’s program; it has become more a matter of our character and the way we use it.”

Despite family responsibilities and other barriers cited by adult students in this study, they are very involved in college. Most of their campus involvement was related to campus governance and policies, honors and academic related societies, and peer advising/mentoring. These activities reflected their perspective on what motivates adult students to get involved in campus life: personal benefit and purposeful involvement.

“I was fortunate enough to be selected as a peer assistant during my second year. This appointment afforded me daily contact with first-year students and I was able to guide many of them through what is often a tumultuous first year.”

Being involved in campus governance and policy-influencing activities provided these adult students with opportunities to make their concerns known and have them addressed. Also, the adults in this study participated in activities that provided documentation of academic excellences added to their credentials thus, increasing their ability to compete with their younger peers when they return to the workforce.

Institutional Characteristics

Heath (1991) wrote: “Yes mature persons are hopeful; they have the psychic resources to alter their environment or themselves more effectively.”

The geographical location of the metropolitan universities in this study in proximity to home for two students was far enough away from home to distance them from possible distractions but close enough to still have access to family.

“(The campus) is in a different city. There are less distractions from friends and associates.”

The adult students in this study described differences in peoples’ attitudes and behaviors that made their present campuses a better educational experience

“I was enlightened as to the difference in attending a large public university. . . and attending a small private school. . . . The. . . student body as a whole was more mature than those who attended [the private college] and many of the students worked full-time jobs. The rest, seemingly those other than full scholarship students, worked part-time.”

Lastly, certain academic majors such as social work, had larger numbers of nontraditional age students. Required courses associated with these majors provide adult students in this study with an opportunity to study in a learning environment in which they were not a novelty and interacted with faculty who were experienced in adult student instruction. On-campus employment opportunities were instrumental in providing these students with opportunities to develop meaningful relationships with their traditional age peers. It was through these experiences that they discovered their level of importance in the development and educational persistence of their younger peers.

Discussion and Implications

For the women in this study, balancing parenting responsibilities with educational goals was important. They equated their success in college with the positive effects that a college degree will have on their children as well, thus, making attaining a college degree an extension of their parenting responsibility. These results dispel the myth that adult students’ family responsibilities detract from their ability to be engaged in campus life. However, the adult students in this study were very strategic about what type of activities they chose to participate in or develop an affiliation. The time they invested in co-curricular activities and with individuals within the campus community had to assist them in gaining marketable skills, and enhances their educational credentials and self-concept.

Another interesting observation that emerged from this study was related to race. There was no mention of race within the context of student engagement by the adult students in this study. These findings may suggest that adult students of color may be far enough along the racial identity continuum that they have more experience decoding and managing race-related responses. Age, however, emerges as a new characteristic, which becomes more salient to adults of color in attending universities because most of these institutions’ mission and culture is focused the education of traditional age students.

Metropolitan universities have the potential to provide adult students with a rewarding and meaningful college experience. The study of student engagement involves exploring ways in which universities can create campus environments that increase students' connection to academic inquiry and students' learning experiences. For adult students, student engagement is enhanced to personal by relevancy. Thus, universities must:

- Provide adult students with opportunities to participate in purposeful activities.
- Demonstrate the institutions' commitment to enhancing their success through engaging academic experiences.
- Assist adult students with discovering links between their participation in campus life and their present and future success.
- Include adult students in activities related to institutional governance and policy development.
- Provide professional development opportunities for teaching faculty and administrators to increase their knowledge of adult student learning.

In *Leaving College*, Tinto (1999) made an excellent statement that truly applies to the three adult students in this study: "(E)ducation is a lifelong process and the movement of individuals in and out of institutions of higher education is but one stage in that process."

References

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