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*Adult learners juggle multiple roles while attending
institutions of higher education. Adult students' roles and
the implications for adults' success in college are
discussed in this chapter.*

Multiple Roles of Adult Learners

Ellen E. Fairchild

As readers will find in other chapters of this volume, adult, or nontradi-
tional, students compose one of the fastest growing segments of higher edu-
cation's student populations. Adult learners' palette of life experience is
colored with older age, full-time employment, and the roles of spouse and
parent (Villela and Hu, 1991). The combinations of life experience and fam-
ily configurations are as plentiful and extraordinary as the number of adults
themselves.

Higher education is only one of the many activities in which adult stu-
dents are involved. For one thing, adults often are employed full-time. In
addition to their work roles, adults are caregivers for children and aging
relatives, community leaders, and volunteer workers. Although adult stu-
dents are unique individually, they share some common traits. Typically,
adults are on campus only for classes or administrative requirements, as
opposed to social or athletic activities (O'Connor, 1994), and they navigate
college independently, without an age cohort (Benshoff and Lewis, 1992).
As Carol Kasworm notes in Chapter One, most adults attend school part-
time. They do not live on campus, are not involved in campus organiza-
tions, and their social groups are not associated with the college (Bradley
and Graham, 2000).

Generally, adults take an interest in higher education when they have
determined that there will be a return on their investment of time, money,
and effort (Tharp, 1988). Because adult students finance most of their edu-
cation (O'Connor, 1994), they protect their investment through their
achievement orientation and high motivation (Benshoff and Lewis, 1992).
Adults attend class, work seriously (Graham and Donaldson, 1999), and
value opportunities to integrate academic learning with life and work expe-
riences (Benshoff and Lewis, 1992).

Chickering and Havighurst (as cited in Terrell, 1990) describe several adult transitions that have an effect on adult students' participation in higher education. As adults build families, careers, and positions within their communities, their perception of higher education changes. Rather than being a life-encompassing, identity-building experience, such as the one we hope to provide for traditional-aged students, higher education for adults is one activity among many in which adults can participate to meet other specific needs, such as learning a new job-related skill or preparing for a new career altogether.

Given adults' differences from the traditional-aged students with whom we are most familiar and their differences from and commonalities with one another, how can we best support them to persist and succeed in higher education? In this chapter, I intend to begin to answer this question.

Common Problems

Once adults have made the decision to enter higher education, threats to success caused by multiple role demands and institutional barriers form a web of perception, constraint, and role demands. Mercer (1993) divides barriers to persistence into three classes: situational, dispositional, and institutional. Family, job, and civic commitment all play a part in determining situational barriers. Dispositional barriers are intrapersonal and consequently much harder to define, and they include dissonance among role demands. Institutional barriers are systemic barriers that exclude adults or make it difficult for them to successfully navigate through their higher education.

Situational Barriers. Parents feel guilt about being unavailable when their children need them, with mothers of children younger than thirteen feeling the most conflict (Terrell, 1990). The age of the children may well determine the persistence of women. Those with older children may persist to graduation, whereas those with young children may interrupt or stop their education (Carney-Crompton and Tan, 2002).

Finances play a significant role in the ability of adults to complete their academic goals. In addition to tuition and related expenses, parents with young children may have to pay for child care while at work and in class. Lower-income families cannot afford such services as child care or summer camp while school is out of session (Terrell, 1990). Time and energy spent trying to "make ends meet" can drain the most dedicated student. Household income, the number of dependents in the household, and the financial aid received by the student are all variables that determine the persistence rate of adult students (Carney-Crompton and Tan, 2002). Although other variables can be negotiated, income levels cannot. The basic needs of the family, like food and rent or mortgage, take priority over educational outlays.

Job responsibilities are both a blessing and a curse for adult students. Hours of employment have a positive effect on the psychological well-being of adults (Chartrand, 1992) but at the cost of most of their spare time (Terrell, 1990). Adult students may have to make career compromises for the sake of both their families and their academic work (Terrell, 1990), leading to health and financial consequences.

Dispositional Barriers. Home (1998) reports three dimensions of role strain among women:

• Role conflict from simultaneous, incompatible demands
• Role overload, or insufficient time to meet all demands
• Role contagion, or preoccupation with one role while performing another

Increases in roles, demands, and time conflicts are associated with high stress, anxiety, and depression for adult female students (Carney-Crompton and Tan, 2002). Mothers of young children experience more role conflict (Home, 1998) and guilt over being unavailable to their children (Terrell, 1990). Women with low income report more role conflict (Home, 1998), perhaps because of the lack of funds to ease the multiple task assignments.

Full-time students report role overload, and student, family, and job demands all contribute to role contagion (Home, 1998). Many full-time students are unable to fully anticipate the effects of their combined role demands. In contrast to jobs with fixed hours, student and family demands never seem to end. Caregivers may be more vulnerable to role contagion because of the guilt associated with the demands of their other roles (Home, 1998).

Support from family and friends is essential when adults are making the decision to stay in school or stop out (Chartrand, 1992). Carney-Crompton and Tan (2002) report that traditional-aged students have more supportive individuals available in their lives than do adult students. This may well be an area in which institutions can develop services to strengthen social support networks.

Institutional Barriers. Schools often are not structured to accommodate adult students (Benshoff and Lewis, 1992). Colleges and universities are ill equipped to deal with the career orientation of adults (Bauer and Mott, 1990), and class work may do little to meld life experiences into academic subject matter. Office and class hours may not meet the needs of students who work and care for families, and the institution may ignore or discredit the civic and school involvement important to adult students. Adult students may never find a cohort of similar students with whom they can connect socially or emotionally.

Institutional understandings of students are contrary to adult students' experiences and needs. For instance, student affairs professionals learn early and often that by fostering student involvement, they foster student development. However, the dominant definition of student involvement—"the

amount of physical and psychological time and energy that students invest in both out-of-class and in-class activities" (Graham and Donaldson, 1999, p. 148)—is focused on serving traditional-aged students. As I have discussed, adults typically are not involved in college in traditional ways. Yet, adults develop and grow throughout their engagement in higher education (Graham and Donaldson, 1999). Adults persist against difficult odds in an institutional system that does not recognize them for who they are and is not designed to meet their needs (Sandler, 2000).

How Multiple Roles Help Adult Students

Despite multiple role expectations and a lack of campus involvement, adult students learn and grow as much as or more than younger students during their collegiate experience (Graham and Donaldson, 1999). What do adult students do differently than traditional students that leads to this academic success?

Bradley and Graham (2000) propose four ways in which adult students succeed despite the challenges their multiple roles present:

Adult students focus their learning on skills and knowledge that are applicable to their life circumstance.

Adult students, because of their age, have a more complex knowledge base on which to draw.

Adult students are involved with their families, communities, and careers. This more authentic involvement provides a direct connection from the classroom to more meaningful real-life experiences.

Adult students make the most of class time to interact with faculty and peers. This allows them to make meaning of the material immediately after it has been presented.

Institutional Response

At present, most institutions are ill equipped to take on the diverse needs of their adult student population. This chapter concludes with my recommendations based on over twelve years' experience serving adult students.

Institutions should revisit how they provide student services. For instance, a one-stop-shop format coupled with Web-based services and extended office hours can go a long way toward serving the needs of busy adult students (Terrell, 1990). Convenient registration, including online registration, helps to keep the number of trips to campus to a minimum. Adequate and close parking can reduce the time needed to take care of administrative activities such as admission, registration, and advising (Villela and Hu, 1991).

Several authors recommend an orientation program tailored to adult students (see, for example, Carney-Crompton and Tan, 2002; Terrell,

1990). Orientation for adults can help them anticipate problems that may arise from role conflict and gain realistic expectations about negotiating family, school, and employment responsibilities. Orientation programs also can help students connect with one another and begin to build social support networks.

As Karen Hatfield writes in Chapter Four, the institution should not ignore financial issues. Adults make wonderful work-study employees (Terrell, 1990), and they should not have to pay student fees for activities in which they do not participate (O'Connor, 1994). Institutional aid for part-time students may ease some of the role strain associated with the multiple roles of adult students. In addition, campuses that provide low-cost child care on campus will save their students time and money. Furthermore, parents may feel less guilt about dividing their time if their children are cared for in a safe, quality child-care facility nearby (Terrell, 1990).

To engage adult students in extracurricular activities, family-oriented events should be offered (Terrell, 1990). Also, making it possible for adult students to serve on university committees and in leadership positions will serve them both professionally and personally, in addition to contributing to their sense of belonging. Adults should also be given opportunities to interact in smaller groups and one-on-one with faculty and campus administrators (Carney-Crompton and Tan, 2002).

Finally, admissions criteria can be evaluated for possible changes. Traditional admission and recruitment strategies may not work with adult students. Grades, standardized tests, and class rank do not necessarily reflect how well an adult student will do at this later stage in life (Carney-Crompton and Tan, 2002). Credit for life experience is another way institutions can offer an alternative and authentic evaluation of knowledge and skill.

Conclusion

The comments in this chapter will sound familiar to those who have worked with adult learners. Those of us who work with adult students know they have made great sacrifices to enroll in college. We also know how difficult it is for adult students to balance work, education, and family life. Adult students have little time to make connections on a college campus. One caring person who answers questions and offers advice may be viewed as a life preserver in a sea of stress and confusion. If I have learned one thing in my work with adults, it is this: we can make a difference for many people by changing our institutional assumptions about and approaches to students. But ultimately, we make a difference in student lives one student at a time. Be that life preserver to that one student, and work toward making your institution more accommodating to adults as a group. The authors cited in this chapter offer insight into the psyche and life experiences of adult students. The suggestions they make for institutions make sense not only for

that 38 percent of undergraduates who are adults but for all students. As our student populations become more and more "nontraditional," everyone will benefit from a place that acknowledges adult students and strives to accommodate their special needs.

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