# Are We Doing Enough to Recruit and Retain Nontraditional, Part Time Learners in Our Colleges and Universities?

Ellen Flynn[1], Jacqueline Rios[2]

[1]Ph.D. University of Bridgeport
[2]M.Ed. University of Bridgeport
Corresponding Author: eflynn@bridgeport.edu

*Abstract*

*The researchers contend that colleges and universities are not providing enough student support services, academic advisement, proper course design and course content to meet the cognitive, social emotional, financial, and work-related needs of nontraditional, part time learners. Even though enrollment for part time learners is projected to increase in the near future, colleges and universities tend to overlook this ever-growing, diverse student population. Suggestions for how to improve support services for the nontraditional, part time learner, recruitment, and retention initiatives, as well as effective teaching-learning experiences to promote academic success for the part time learner are presented and discussed in detail. The implementation of these suggestions should promote the part time learner's ability to acquire the necessary skills and knowledge to stay relevant in the job market and, at the same time, increase enrollment of this unique student population on our college and university campuses.*

*Keywords—nontraditional college students, part time learners, recruitment and retention efforts, course design for working adults.*

The simple answer to the title's question is "no," but the more complex question we should explore is why we fail them. Who are our nontraditional, part time, college students? These prospective college students are individuals who have delayed enrollment to college or attend college part-time and work full time, and they generally have dependents to care for other than a spouse. In addition, they could be single parents raising children, and may not have completed high school (Choy, 2002). Given these characteristics, it is no wonder that we in higher education have failed to recruit and retain our nontraditional adult students. Their needs are great, and diverse. Moreover, our colleges and universities seem to provide comprehensive student services for mostly traditional students while often overlooking the needs of nontraditional students (Remenick, 2019). Yet, enrollment in degree-granting postsecondary institutions of students who are 35 years old and older is "projected to increase by 5% from 2017 to 2028 (3.3 million)" (Hussar & Bailey, 2020, p. 22). Not only do we overlook our nontraditional student population in our universities, but as projected, this student population will increase in the near future. Together with an observable "shift to full-time workers who are juggling various competing responsibilities while attending college", we should focus on addressing the academic, social emotional, and financial needs of our adult students (Osam et al., 2017, p.55).

To begin to understand our part time learners, we need to know that they generally consider themselves workers/employees first (Jinkens, 2009; Ritt, 2008; Urban & Jirsakova, 2022). Therefore, completing a college degree must be seen as career advancement. With a college and graduate degree, the

nontraditional student can acquire specific skills to stay relevant in the job market. Today's workplace consists of a high-tech, service-oriented intelligence economy, that is requiring workers to have some form of post-secondary education (Fletcher & Tyson, 2021). Most adult workers rely on dual incomes to support their families and cannot depend on longevity in a company as generations did before, consequently current workers must adapt by making career changes in the future (Marade & Breithaupt, 2018).

The ability to gain new skills through continuing education and career training after entering the workforce is vital for survival. Research shows that adult learners want options for career direction, and they need a university to provide them with those skill-building alternatives. According to Power and Wartalski (2020), besides flexibility in scheduling classes, and choice in course selection, adult learners want a meaningful relationship experience with someone who cares about them at the university. They need to be given "comprehensive communication to help them navigate academic programs, understand future trends in the workplace, and clarify career trajectories" (p.156).

It seems reasonable to assume that one possible pipeline for recruiting nontraditional students may be precisely the workplace. Many adults can only return to college to complete their degree because their employers provide tuition reimbursement. As Brown (2018) states, "employers who recognize that advancing employees' post-secondary education may, in fact, retain their work force and retain loyal workers", which creates a reciprocal benefit for both parties (p. 18). College admissions representatives might consider partnering with companies and agencies within the community to identify those workers eager to advance their career by pursuing a college degree. And of course, our degrees should be career-oriented, promotion-enhancing, and ahead of the future work trends (Knowles,1984; Mezirow, 2012; Power & Waralski, 2020). Postsecondary institutions can go a long way toward improving adult learners' degree attainment by supporting a greater collaboration between employers, employees, colleges, and universities (Brown, 2018, p. 20).

Not only should colleges reach out to workers in the community, but they must be able to offer those workers a convenient way to complete courses while helping them meet their personal and professional responsibilities. Saar et al., (2014) found that institutions that have flexible educational programs lessen the common barriers faced by adult learners.

Factors, such as affordability and class times, should be attended to by offering adult learners a variable format of classes (e.g., online classes and evening courses) as well as "providing financial incentives through scholarships" (as cited in Bellare et al., 2021, p. 34).

Once we have enrolled a nontraditional, part time student in a college course, how do we retain and help them persist in achieving the degree? Since many college professors are unaware of Knowles' (1984) andragogy, that is "the art and science of adult learning", we may need to train them on the basics of adult education. Adult students literally learn differently from traditional undergraduate students, and most college professors are unable to recognize the differences (Allen, 2016). Some of the major differences are that adult learners use their previously acquired knowledge through life experiences, and they build upon that foundation to assimilate new knowledge and skills presented in the college classroom (Knowles, 1984). We tend to let down our nontraditional students, once in our classroom, by failing to understand and incorporate adult students' learning styles and techniques.

Learning for the nontraditional, part time student means finding solutions to real-world problems. As Knowles (1984) stated, learning for adults "shift from one of subject-centeredness to one of problem-centeredness" (as cited in Cox, 2015, p. 27). Adult learners seem to be more interested in course content that has "immediate relevance and impact to their job or personal life" (Knowles et al.,2005, p. 175). Professors, according to Knowles (1973), will have to learn to become "facilitators" of personal learning, rather than "teachers of knowledge". By setting up courses that promote the discovery of knowledge through problem-solving tasks, the adult student will assume responsibility for their own self-directed learning (as cited in Cox, 2015).

Specifically, adult students, as Knowles once stated (1973), are a "neglected species whose particular dispositions, needs, and approaches to learning are rarely considered in the design of college-level curricula" (as cited in Allen, 2016, p.26). We know adult learners prefer online courses, yet when we construct our online courses, we fail our nontraditional students by neglecting to provide them with the "practical, real-world problem-based approaches to learning" that they would naturally favor (Chametzky, 2014, p. 814). Online formats "require students to be more active in their learning process", and adult students are naturally "self-directed learners" and interested in "taking responsibility for their own learning" (Knowles et al.,

2005, p. 70). If we take into consideration the criteria for appropriate online course design for adult learners that Cercone (2008) outlined, we would be meeting the nontraditional students' dispositional needs that would enhance the learning experience for them.

As Cercone (2008) recommends, adult learners should be able to move through the online course material at their own pace, allowing them to build on previous knowledge, and offering them "multi-mode strategies" to synthesize newly acquired knowledge (p. 141). Of course, all students would benefit from the above-mentioned conditions for learning, but the adult learner must also find the online course content "meaningful" to their work/career advancement. We may have failed our nontraditional student by overlooking the reasons that they are juggling full-time work while raising families and adding online college courses to their already busy lives. They have signed on to the added stress of college to advance their careers, to become more marketable, and to be more relevant in a technologically advanced work environment. How can we help our nontraditional students achieve these goals?

As online instructors, we can encourage, promote, and welcome our students' self-reflection. According to Huang et al., (2021), "adult learners need to self-reflect on their learning process and be given support for transformational learning" (p. 211). Self-reflection can be achieved through students submitting a journal entity to the online instructor after reading an article or chapter in the textbook, and after responding to a classmate's discussion post. In addition, assigning a grade for participation within the group discussion forum may also encourage and reinforce a student's ability to self-reflect. We should also ask our nontraditional students to tell us how the course material applies to their career goals and career advancement.

Another way to promote an adult learner's self-reflection in an online course is to integrate activities that require a collaborative "co-reflective" response to a problem-solving task. As Everett et al. (2023) stated co-reflection creates "an online, diverse online learning community identification" where students can reflect collaboratively, which would "motivate students to read each other's posts and comments", creating "a sense of community" within the classroom (p.210). More importantly, co-reflection "challenges our perceptions", and causes us to "question our personal values and beliefs" and to develop a "strong sense of empathy" for another's perspective. This is what Robertson (1996)

calls "transformational learning", that is, a shift in perspective that results from the collaborative co-reflective experience.

We will continue to fail our nontraditional, part time students if we ignore the educational goal of transformational learning as we design our online courses for the adult learner. We ought to encourage transformational outcomes through "deliberate efforts". As Nichols et al. (2020) explain "deliberate efforts to encourage perspective transformation can be made in both course materials and direct teaching interventions" (p. 51). "Imagining how things could be different is central to the initiation of the transformative learning process" (Mezirow, 2012, p. 82). How can we promote transformational learning in our classes? By incorporating assignments that require personal reflection, group co-reflection, and selecting "perspective-challenging readings" that encourage self-evaluation and critical thinking, as we aim for a paradigm shift in thinking/feeling/knowing for our adult learners (Nichols et al. 2020, p.52).

Critical reflection and discourse often take place within the context of problem-solving, and it is only after learners become critically reflective of past assumptions, experiences, values, and beliefs that they are more open to new information and thoughts (Mezirow, 2012). As Sokol and Cranton (1998) indicated, "transformative learners question their perspectives, open new ways of looking at their practice, revise their views, and eventually behave differently based on new perspectives. "Thus, critical reflection is the central process in transformative learning that leads to a "shift in thinking towards a more inclusive, differentiated, permeable, and integrated perspective" (Mezirow, 1991, as cited in Sokol & Cranton 1998, p 14).

Perhaps the most important factor that would help us retain our nontraditional, part time students is to be available by developing a genuine interest in them as individuals. Forging meaningful relationships in our classes can be strengthened by easy access to various modes of interpersonal communication after class. Surveys show that students "want to feel that the instructor is available through many forms of communications, not just through emails" (Osam et al., 2017, p.58). That would mean providing interface communication, preferably in the evening after the adult student has completed the family responsibilities of dinner, getting children to bed, and finding some quiet time for homework. Finally, we could meet the social emotional needs of the adult learner by setting up regular zoom video conferencing sessions, and weekly

individualized online office hours. (Reid et al., 2009, Tung, 2013, as cited in Dwyer & Walsh, 2020, p. 19).

Since learning is a social experience, and meaningful online learning incorporates active social engagement with others through informal chat rooms, small group break-out sessions, and individualized zoom conferencing sessions, the adult student should begin to experience a sense of belonging to a larger learning community (Dabbagh et al., 2019 as cited in Pham et al., 2021). When the university truly commits to meeting the academic, social emotional, and financial needs of the part time learner, the student may just find that returning to college enriches their life in ways they never fully expected when first considering the idea of returning to school.

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