

2019

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### Recommended Citation

Calvano, L., Bohrman, C., Ferrick, M., & Jones, K. (2021). Creating a Supportive Learning Community for Adult Students from Admissions to Graduation. *Journal of Access, Retention, and Inclusion in Higher Education*, 2(1). Retrieved from <https://digitalcommons.wcupa.edu/jarihe/vol2/iss1/4>

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## Creating a Supportive Learning Community for Adult Students from Admissions to Graduation

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### ABSTRACT

**With a growing number of adults entering or returning to higher education, colleges and universities need to consider their unique needs and strengths within the classroom as well as in the larger campus community. This article describes how one university has approached supporting adult learners from the admissions process to the classroom to student support services. We discuss some of the challenges we have faced, how we have used the existing literature to inform our approaches and the creative solutions we have developed in the absence of research to guide our practices. Adult learners bring their wealth of lived professional and personal experiences to the campus and therefore we view our efforts to increase access and persistence for this population as a means of enriching the university experience for all students.**

### Introduction

Colleges and universities throughout the United States are experiencing declining enrollments among students who are traditional college age, with this trend expected to continue well into the future. At the same time, the number of adult learners in higher education is increasing and colleges and universities are looking to them to bolster falling enrollments (EAB, 2019). Although there is no universal definition of an adult learner, age is generally considered to be the defining characteristic. However, some scholars argue that the classification should encompass other factors beyond age such as delayed entry into college, attending part-time, having dependents and being financially independent (Choy, 2002).

Adult learners enter higher education with a greater range of life experiences than traditional-age students. These experiences, which Astin (1991) calls inputs, are important to understand because they impact learning outcomes and assessment strategies. In addition, the wide variety of adult learner inputs require that faculty and staff deploy a unique set of skills to help students critically examine their life experiences and challenge pre-conceived and sometimes deep-seated beliefs (Chen, 2017). In addition to their roles as students, adult learners tend to juggle other roles related to family, work and community. These additional roles can be assets, but they can also make it difficult to prioritize education (Ross-Gordon, 2011). Adult learners may also experience challenges related to writing and technology use and may make assumptions about academic environments, especially if they transferred from another institution or have been out of school for an extended period of time.

The authors of this article are all faculty and staff at West Chester University (WCU), a public university that is part of the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education (PASSHE). All of us have worked at WCU's branch campus in Center City Philadelphia, which has been in existence since 2013 and currently has approximately 350 students. Compared to WCU's main campus where the adult learner population is approximately 9%, the majority of students on the Philadelphia campus are part of this demographic. Our experiences teaching and supporting adult learners led us to apply for an internal WCU grant to sponsor a series of professional development workshops for faculty and staff focused on the distinct needs of these students. We also presented insights from the workshops at WCU's annual Scholarship of Teaching, Learning and Assessment Conference in January 2019. Our conference presentation provided the inspiration to write about adult learners.

In this article, we discuss the challenges and opportunities of working with adult learners and share lessons learned from the literature and our own experience related to admissions, pedagogy, student support and student engagement. We emphasize the importance of creating a supportive environment for adult learners inside the classroom and beyond. In this article, we define adult learners as students 25 years or older, which is the common definition in the literature and also the one used by our university and PASSHE. We also use the term "adult learner" rather than "post-traditional student" because this is how our university refers to this population.

### **Admissions**

While the classroom environment is key to student retention (Tinto, 1997), student success begins prior to enrollment with the admissions process, where expectations about the educational experience are forged. Yet, adult learners are a forgotten population of students in the conversation about educational access (Perna, 2016; Knowles, 1984). As colleges and universities seek to attract more adult learners to begin or complete their degrees, discussions about equitable educational access must include this demographic. The adult learner college access literature asks that a critical lens be placed on understanding the needs of the adult learner in revamping college admissions practices (Conley, 2010; Perna, 2016). Some higher education institutions have already begun to redesign their application processes, for example by removing barriers such as standardized test scores that do not provide the best indicators of long-term success (Bethea, 2017).

According to a white paper produced by the University Professional and Continuing Education Association (2017), current structures of postsecondary federal education policy are suited for students who take the traditional route to entering college immediately upon graduation. Given declining enrollments, college admissions offices are now faced with having to rely on more than just the traditional student from the high school pipeline. Thus, institutions, including our own, are incorporating adult learners into their recruitment and strategic enrollment management plans. The shift of focus to consider adult learners is also happening at the national level with organizations such as the National Adult Learner Coalition under the University Professional and Continuing Education Association (UPCEA) and the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) advocating for adult learner support.

While conversations about college access are starting to consider this demographic, adult learners are not matriculating into colleges and universities at the same rate as they are expressing interest (Perna, 2016; National Association for College Admission Counseling,

2018). National data indicates that the percentage of adult learners who entered the inquiry phase of admissions increased by over 50% between 2000 and 2012, but actual adult learner enrollment only increased by 25% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018; National Association for College Admission Counseling, 2018). Research suggests that adult learners are not enrolling due to concerns about work-life balance, adequate financial support, and span of time since high school graduation (Hagelskamp, Schliefer, & DiStasi, 2013).

Considering the barriers and understanding the challenges of adult college applicants is paramount as admissions offices craft their recruitment plans (Bethea, 2016; Conley 2010; Flores & Horn, 2017). While numerous scholars have offered theories to explain the factors that influence an adult learner's decision to go to college, the UPCEA (2017) has introduced four practical considerations that admissions offices should incorporate when evaluating adult learner applications: 1) information on necessary labor market skills and required credentials can seem confusing and overwhelming; 2) applicants need to complete credentials with more flexibility and in quicker time; 3) access to adequate technology is lacking, which impacts access to online applications; and 4) state education regulations do not consider online learners, which is the modality that many adult learners prefer.

Adult learners typically enter the college application process with institutions that do not have adequate responses to these challenges despite possessing the resources needed to address these issues (Hagelskamp et al., 2013). The disconnect often occurs in the relationship between admissions and academic offices. Admissions professionals have to be equipped with as much information as possible to make good decisions. To this end, admissions offices must build better partnerships with academic deans and faculty to be able to provide adequate information during the recruitment season.

There are numerous best practices and examples of institutional success with regard to considering the needs of adult learners in the admissions process. For example, more than 70% of adult learners who have gained admission to four-year colleges participated in some form of pre-application event or an application process that is just for adult learners (Carnervale, Stroh & Gulish, 2015). Pre-application events allow prospective students to complete their application on site, have their academic credentials evaluated and speak directly to faculty and staff (Carnervale et al., 2015). Our university hosts onsite application completion boot camps where adult learners can work with a professional staff member to complete their application. Data is still being collected on the matriculation of these applicants, but WCU was able to see increases in completed applications from this demographic (Freed, 2018). Other institutions, such as Penn State University and the University of Michigan, are taking their accommodations a step further by offering an adult learner specific application process. For example, adult learners are not required to submit standardized test scores and the applicants' time-in-career can be considered as merit in making an admissions decision.

### **The Classroom Experience**

According to Knowles (1972, p. 35), the fundamental difference between a child's and an adult's perception of experience is that "to a child, experience is something that happens to him; to an adult, his experience is who he is." For this reason, it is critical that educators convey respect for the lived experience of adult learners. Many professors view the experience of adult students as an asset to the classroom (Brinthaupt & Eady, 2014; Day, Lovato, Tull, & Ross-Gordon, 2011). Students' vast base of experience fosters a sense of self-identity and serves as a

resource for peer learning. However, greater individual differences and potential biases based on anecdotal experiences may also negatively impact learning (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2015). Professors can capitalize on this experience and minimize potential friction by using classroom discussion, activities and assignments to help students make connections between their previous experience and class concepts (Ross-Gordon, 2003; Day, Lovato, Tull, & Ross-Gordon, 2011; Holyoke & Larson, 2009). Some adult learners may be skeptical of the value of education, making comments such as “I am only here for the degree.” These students may feel that their knowledge and experience is not valued in formal education programs (Kasworm, 2003; Kasworm, 2008), so it is particularly important for professors to validate knowledge gained through lived experience in addition to other forms of knowledge.

Another challenge of working with students with extensive life and professional experience is that sometimes they can over-rely on anecdotal evidence. One approach to adult education, transformative learning theory, provides a useful framework for students to critically reflect on their assumptions and knowledge gained through previous experience (Mezirow, 1997). Mezirow (1990) asserts that “by far the most significant learning experience in adulthood involves critical self-reflection - reassessing the way we have posed problems and reassessing our own orientation to perceiving, knowing, believing, feeling and acting” (p.4). Classroom dialogues present an opportunity for students to challenge their own, as well as their peers, thinking and approach to problem solving.

It is particularly important for professors teaching adult learners to think about how the classroom environment can create an opportunity for students to form relationships with each other as well as the faculty member. The classroom is often where adult learners develop a sense of community within the university, as many of them do not have the time to participate in extra-curricular activities (Kasworm, 2003; Kasworm, 2014; Panacci, 2015; Ross-Gordon, 2003). Knowles (1984) suggests that professors engage students in stating their preferences throughout all aspects of their education. This may involve consulting students about when to hold classes or about their preferred classroom format (in-person, blended, or fully online). While research indicates that many adult learners prefer the convenience and flexibility of online learning, some students may struggle with the associated technology or feel more connected to the material and their classmates with an in-person format (Hannay & Newvine, 2006; Moskal, Dziuban, & Hartman, 2010; Nollenberger, K. (2015). Our experience is consistent with this research. In addition, we have found that the optimal classroom also format depends on programmatic norms and the expectations and needs of students within that particular program. For example, our RN to BSN program meets 100% online, our BS in Management program uses a mix of in-person and online classes and our Social Work Program offers classes primarily in person.

Negotiating classroom policies is another way that professors can elicit the help of students to navigate a balance between accommodating student life circumstances and maintaining certain classroom standards. For example, instructors at WCU’s Philadelphia campus have found it helpful to begin the semester by asking students what they want the class to look and feel like. As some students complain that this exercise feels unhelpful because people often assert platitudes like, ‘everyone should be respectful of others,’ instructors then ask students to be more concrete in their suggestions. What behavior would they observe if everyone was behaving respectfully? Is showing up late disrespectful of others? Is texting during class a sign of disrespect?

Navigating this balance with adult learners has produced contention specifically about classroom cell phone policies. Some students insist, for example, that they need to be available to a babysitter or an ailing parent at all times. However, a systematic review of research on cell phone usage in the classroom indicates that cell phones are a distraction and impair learning abilities (Chen & Yan, 2016). Even if a student is not using a cell phone, merely having it out could affect a student's concentration and ability to retain information (Lee, Kim, McDonough, Mendoza, & Kim, 2017). Furthermore, the use of cell phones can influence both the individual student as well as other students in the class, as 90% of students notice when others are using a cell phone during class time (Berry & Westfall, 2015). Some instructors at WCU's Philadelphia campus use discussions as a way to jointly problem solve with students about how they can minimize distraction, while acknowledging their home life needs. Other examples of complicated issues that adult learners face and that professors can address in collaboration with them are: 1) whether or not they can bring their child with them to class; 2) how to meet with them if they are not available to come in person to office hours; 3) the time of day that electronic assignments should be submitted; 4) how to handle absenteeism and requests for extensions in cases of work, family and personal crises; 5) how to handle group work assignments when students have limited time to meet outside of class.

In the negotiation of class policies, professors may need to limit the scope of negotiation. For example, there may be certain aspects of the class that are required by an accrediting body. While these limits can be legitimate, Kaplan and Renard (2015) caution professors not to limit classroom possibility by confusing interests, or overarching goals, with positions, or how goals are accomplished. For example, a professor's interest might be for students to improve their writing skills and their position may be to require them to go to the writing center outside of class time. To keep possibilities open and consider adult learners' limited time availability outside of class, an alternative position that some faculty have implemented is to bring a representative from the writing center to the classroom. As more traditional age students are experiencing many of the challenges faced by adult learners (Zerquera, Ziskin, & Torres, 2018), some of these negotiation strategies and alternative positions may be relevant to all college classrooms.

### **Student Support**

In addition to effective pedagogy, academic, social, and financial supports are vital to student success (Tinto, 2012; Kuh et al., 2006). We have a collective responsibility as staff, faculty, and administrators to design systems that successfully induce students to use those supports.

At WCU's Philadelphia campus, this labor has taken shape in the Student Success Center (SSC). Like many institutions working to enmesh support services, the SSC represents our intention to design supports that are flexible and responsive to the needs of our students. It has evolved from a writing center into a robust resource center with local and intra-campus writing, research, and career development supports. In addition to receiving in-person and online tutoring support with course writing assignments, students use the SSC to order materials from our university library as well as access and print resources and research articles using our learning management system Desire 2 Learn (D2L). Since more than 80% of our students are adult learners, helping them to navigate resources through high-touch, one-on-one support has proven to be meaningful given the demands on their time and the discomfort that often results from an extended absence from higher education environments. These "tenacious persisters" have clear

career goals, significant demands on their time, and often carry specific self-perceptions which may affect their use of support services (Kinser & Deitchman, 2008). As a result, our practices have focused on acknowledging and complementing the diverse roles, experiences, and masteries of adult learners (Kasworm, 2007; Soares, Gagliardi, & Nellum, 2017).

This work is perhaps most visible in the ways we have connected the SSC with our largest departments: the Bachelors and Masters of Social Work programs. Since its founding in 2013, the Philadelphia campus has developed quickly, with student enrollment tripling in less than four years. This growth, unsurprisingly, resulted in several resource gaps. In response, faculty, staff, and students in Philadelphia, led by Social Work colleagues, initiated university-wide conversations about designing supports that would respond more effectively to our particular institutional context. The Social Work departments encouraged the growth of more robust support structures by providing space for in-class workshops connecting library and research support, collaborative grant-writing initiatives, and service learning. The SSC has also hired graduate assistants from the Masters in Social Work program, expanded hours to better serve students with constrained schedules, organized social events and discussion groups, and added discipline-specific training modules and resources for staff and students respectively. Our most recent collaboration has involved discussions of labor-based writing assessment (Inoue, 2019), a key consideration of which has been how to adapt such models to the needs of adult learners.

Unsurprisingly, this collaboration continues to drive how we think about support and serves as a case study highlighting both our successes and future challenges. While the SSC's roots lie in the advocacy and collaborative spirit of our social work colleagues, we recognize that continued growth will require new adaptations. We have grown thus far by doubling-down on the luxury afforded by our modest size, but more work remains as we scale these supports with new departments and an even wider array of services. Thus far, we have collaborated with a discipline keen on understanding their client's systems, strengths, and motivations, and as we continue to gather data and consider the impact of our support policies and practices, we cannot help but acknowledge the interesting correlatives between social work research and our labor to support the development of adult learners.

### **Student Engagement**

One of the greatest challenges on a campus serving mostly adult learners is student engagement outside of the classroom. With many competing demands on their time, such as full-time employment in addition to internships, part-time jobs, and children or other caregiving responsibilities, extracurricular activities are typically not a priority for adult students; the interest in such activities may exist, but the time and energy simply do not. Astin (1984) called this the "zero-sum game" of student involvement – what is given here is lost there – and argued that student behavior, specifically the time and energy they apply in the classroom and other programming, is perhaps the greatest predictor of learning and development. Tinto (2012) has noted that institutions must determine which forms of involvement are most likely to impact their students' success, which is a question we consistently ask in developing co-curricular programming.

In the five and a half years the Philadelphia campus has been in operation, we have offered various types of programming and methods of engaging students on campus outside of the classroom. The most well-attended have been the co-curricular events, often speakers,

occurring during class time with faculty requiring, or providing an incentive (i.e. extra credit points), for students to attend. Additionally, we have found students to be most interested in programming viewed as beneficial in attaining their academic and career goals, as opposed to those that are predominantly social. Examples of successful programming offered include the Human Rights Speaker and Film Series, Career Services workshops (i.e. best practices for resumes and interviews), Balance Day, a de-stress event the week before final exams, Mental Health First Aid Training and the Growth Mindset workshop.

In order to involve the greater campus community in program and event planning, we began the Student and Community Engagement Committee (SCEC), inviting all faculty, staff, and students to participate. The committee meets once per month to discuss ideas and tasks related to extracurricular programming on our campus. Student participation on this committee is critical in determining student interest in campus programming, as well as in the dissemination of information about upcoming events. The SCEC typically conducts a student survey each semester in an effort to gauge student interest in various types of programming and to determine the best times to offer such events.

Additional ways of engaging our students aside from campus events have included a Peer Mentor program for new students, Student Ambassadors to represent our programs at New Student Orientation and recruitment events, and a Student Advisory Board serving as a focus group for the campus. With the understanding that our students' time is limited and valuable, we have worked to make involvement as accessible as possible. For example, we offer students the option to participate in committee meetings, such as the SCEC, via videoconferencing. We also utilize discussion boards in our learning management system to elicit feedback from students who are not able to participate in committee meetings in real time.

### **Conclusion**

In this article, we have discussed strategies to support the unique needs of adult learners beginning even before matriculation. Drawing on the adult learner literature and our own experiences, we argue that higher education institutions must be prepared to offer tailored experiences for adult learners that begin with the admissions process, continue in the classroom and extend to support services and co-curricular programming. For those of us who teach adult learners, this work is also mission-driven in the sense that it is a co-labor between faculty, staff and students that highlights our common purpose: social justice. When we work to make admissions processes, pedagogy and student support structures more equitable, and when we do right by those whom we serve, we are doing social justice work. This work is inextricable from the tasks of recruiting, retaining and graduating students who succeed in their life's work. It is no surprise, then, that the beliefs inherent to social justice frameworks, especially empathy and social responsibility, are key predictors of retention and graduation rates (Sparkman, Maulding, & Roberts, 2012). Our efforts on WCU's Philadelphia campus are attuned to these beliefs, which have in turn enabled us to develop a supportive learning community for our students that extends from admissions to graduation.

Our work responding to the unique experiences of adult students is ongoing. Much of the infrastructure currently in place was implemented by the Social Work faculty and staff, who were uniquely qualified to push for a more effective, supportive and socially-just campus. Yet, as we work toward creating a more socially-just learning environment, we are aware that our successes are certainly serendipitous and a luxury of our size. Other questions remain, such as

how we will adapt these collaborative experiences with the addition of new degree programs and increased enrollments. One of the benefits of working at a branch campus is that the smaller size makes it easier to collaborate with staff and faculty from other departments (Harper, Owens, Funge, & Sullivan, 2017). This spirit of collaboration will guide us through growth and change.

No strategy is foolproof, and we recognize the opposing argument that before we can begin to understand adult learner strategies and adequately enact them, we must first focus on equity and access for all students. However, we believe that true understanding and collaboration are required to support increased access to higher education for adult learners. Leveraging any new idea or philosophy in an educational space will be met with supporters and skeptics; change is difficult, especially in spaces where learning is taking place in a non-binary way. Thus, it is the responsibility of any advocate working in the field of college access, and in particular with adult learners, to understand that they are creating a new learning experience and contributing to a more just future.

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## Biographies

Casey Bohrman is an Associate Professor of Graduate Social Work at West Chester University. She predominantly teaches at their Philadelphia campus. Her scholarship focuses on mental health services, the criminal legal system, and structural violence.

Lisa Calvano, Ph.D. is Associate Professor of Management and Interim Associate Dean of the College of Business and Public Management at West Chester University. She also serves as faculty liaison for the Philadelphia campus and has led the effort to create a Management degree completion program there.

Marcie Ferrick graduated from West Chester University in 2014 with an M.S. in Higher Education Counseling/Student Affairs and serves as the Associate Director for Student Services for West Chester University's Philadelphia Campus.

Kenneth Jones is an admissions professional serving currently as the Assistant Director of Undergraduate Admissions at West Chester University. He is a doctoral student within the Educational Management and Leadership program at Drexel University and will graduate with an Ed.D in Educational Management and Leadership with a focus on Higher Education in 2020.

Benjamin Morgan directs the Success Center at West Chester University in Philadelphia, where he supports the writing, career development, and research of undergraduate and graduate students. He holds degrees in English from Penn State University (B.A.) and West Chester University (M.A.).