

Empowering Nontraditional Students, Cynthia M. Craig, Augusta State University

Abstract. Many entering freshmen no longer fit the profile of the typical recent high school graduate, but instead are more mature students with diverse agendas. The increased enrollment of nontraditional students, entering college freshmen over the age of 25, requires programs and services that accommodate student needs, facilitate academic success, and promote retention. A comprehensive entry course, a multidisciplinary developmental studies and learning support curriculum, and academic and personal support services empower adult students to succeed academically and create a sense of belonging within the academic community. An innovative program, geared specifically to nontraditional students, benefits the students, the institution, and the community in general.

As the overall population of the United States ages, a shift in the age of the college student population is likewise notable. Many current entering freshmen do not fit the traditional profile of the 18 and 19 year old recent high school graduate. Instead, an increasing number are more mature students seeking a broadened educational background, increased self-esteem, a career change, entrance (or re-entrance) into the work force, retraining or further education for advancement in present careers, completion of occupational credentials, or other career related or personal objectives that require at least some college experience. Higher education has become not only the gatekeeper for many blue collar and white collar positions, but also the facilitator of lifelong learning and growth.

According to Brazziel (1987) the National Center for Educational Statistics defines the older student as first time entering freshmen 25 years of age and older. Since 1970 the enrollment in higher education of students over the age of 25 has increased 114%; whereas the enrollment of traditional-age students has only increased 15%. The influx of nontraditional students indicates an increased access to older students "through the front door of higher education" (Kempner & Kinnick, 1990, p. 535). The diverse agendas of these students create a dramatically different enrollment pattern, in which stopping-out and part-time enrollment are not uncommon (Morris & Losak, 1986). The impact of this "new student body" is felt in all areas of higher education and requires not only the redefinition of success and mission, but also expanded programs and services to meet the special needs of the older student population.

Colleges and universities must redefine success in order to keep pace with the changing complexion

of enrollment demographics. The traditional definition of graduation as a criterion for success and stopping-out without a diploma in hand as non-success does not reflect the diversity of "new student" goals and the changes in social, employment, and economic environments (Morris & Losak, 1986). This is especially significant in light of recent trends to down-size large corporate structures, all branches of the military (including complete closure of several military installations), state and federal governmental departments and organizations, as well as work force reductions related to technological advances. Even workers with years of service to a particular company or organization suddenly find job security tenuous. It is perhaps an unfortunate commentary on higher education that of all the social institutions in the United States, postsecondary educational institutions have consistently been among the slowest to respond to the needs of the adult learner (Steltenpohl & Shipton, 1986). A significant number of entering freshmen and returning students have absolutely no intention of pursuing a formal degree program; therefore, the mission of higher education must expand to encompass these students in the "success" formula and make provisions for what Kaufman, Murtha, and Protash (1984) refer to as the myth of college attendance. Transfer education, job preparatory coursework, job upgrade, and college coursework that may be spread over several more than the standard number of years for degree attainment must be incorporated into the vision and the mission of colleges and universities as well as that of community colleges (Morris & Losak, 1986).

The commitment of higher education to the adult learner must go beyond enrollment of these students in the existing curriculum and then graciously exempting them from some traditional requirements such as physical education. Entry into the college academic environment is a major transition for most students. However, for the older adult student this transition can be much more traumatic. Adult students who have missed the traditional "Window of Opportunity" (Kempner & Kinnick, 1990, p. 535) are making the transition from the adult world, which typically involves work and family responsibilities, to the classroom. Nontraditional students have established identities; however, these identities are challenged by the transition to the college environment. These "new students" bring with them an experiential background different from that of traditional college freshmen. It is therefore important to realize that their expectations and experiences will likewise be different from those of the recent high school graduate (Murray, Tanner, & Graves, 1990).

According to Nuegarten (1979), age norms and associated expectations are directly related to the socially defined time and timing. In other words, to be developmentally "on time" means that traditional milestones are achieved within the parameters of the established norm. Adaptational patterns are associated with social perceptions of the age and gender appropriate behavior. Although the lock-step societal notions of timing and age and gender expectations are losing their customary rigidity, postsecondary institutions have been slow to respond. Not all who aspire to higher education are developmentally or financially prepared to enter college immediately after high school graduation; some must delay entry (Kempner & Kinnick, 1990). All these factors combine to generate feelings of isolation. Frequently older students feel that they are strangers in the college world and that they do not belong. In addition, nontraditional students often experience other emotions counterproductive to academic success such as incompetence,

inadequacy, and marginality. Furthermore, these students often lack confidence in their ability to study and learn (Steltenpohl & Shipton, 1986). Uncertainty about the purpose, structure, and the organization of the college or university, in addition to rusty academic skills, further complicate the transition. According to Valentine and Darkenwald (1990), lack of confidence, questionable course relevance, time constraints, low personal priority and negative perceptions of the value of education, cost, and personal problems are the six primary factors that deter participation of adult students.

To counterbalance some of these special needs, Steltenpohl & Shipton (1986) recommend a comprehensive entry course designed to empower older students to succeed in overcoming the feelings of marginality, inadequacy, and incompetence and to achieve a sense of belonging in the college community, thus facilitating a successful transition. It is stressed that the entry course should be exclusively for the adult student. Although many institutions currently have freshman orientation seminars and courses, providing an entry course exclusively for adult students would facilitate identification of the factors that impede success and provide a structure for direct intervention and empowerment. Nontraditional students interviewed on the campus of Augusta State University in Augusta, Georgia suggested that an entry seminar would facilitate the development of a support network that would further integrate older students into the life of the college community as well as provide an "emotionally safe environment" in which to refresh and practice study skills that have atrophied from disuse. In addition, these students view such a course as a springboard for greater involvement in campus politics (student government and publication) as well as a forum in which to address the practical as well as academic needs of the nontraditional student. For example, in the fall of 1994 Adult Learners Eagerly Returning To School (ALERTS) held an organizational meeting on the Augusta State University campus. Some of the practical issues addressed by ALERTS included the installation of an automatic teller machine (ATM) on campus (currently located in the library in response to the ALERTS request); initiation of a Preparing Adult Learners (PAL) system that operates as a mentoring system for incoming nontraditional students; and the establishment of an emergency tracking system that would expedite locating students in case, of emergency. Several other suggestions have been made by the organization to further accommodate the needs of nontraditional students. One interviewee commented, "I really did feel out of place my first quarter in college. It was like I had walked into another world where everyone else was younger than me, most are younger than my children. I was glad to see others on campus my age, but I still felt like I was on the outside looking in. I wasn't sure that I could cut it in college. I began to feel like a failure before I even started my classes." These feelings of disenfranchisement and anxiety were echoed by others interviewed.

According to Kulik, Kulik, & Shwalb (1983), high risk students who enroll in special college programs for high risk students tend to remain in college longer (thus increasing retention) and earn better grades than similar students who do not have the benefit of such programs. Extension of this premise to nontraditional students warrants consideration and further research. Although not all nontraditional students are at risk academically, they may be considered high risk by virtue of their age and the educational system's failure to include these students' goals and needs in the mission and success formula of the institution. Nontraditional students have been out of the classroom for

many years, and, consequently, may require special developmental courses to refresh, reteach, or teach anew skills in mathematics, reading, and English necessary for academic success and goal attainment. This number is increased by those nontraditional students who left high school with marginal academic skills or preparation, but now find college coursework necessary. The "high risk" status of this segment of the nontraditional student population is exacerbated by the need for developmental education in one or more areas. Consequently, a developmental education curriculum designed to remediate academic deficiencies, refresh or teach study skills and time management techniques and strategies as well as develop metacognitive strategies is required. This basic developmental curriculum should be supplemented by courses and support services that help develop the older student as a successful learner and facilitate the transition to the college environment. Counseling, academic advising, career placement, and tutorial services are needed to supplement the basic curriculum and meet the special needs of the nontraditional student.

Some students may also discover that minimum admission requirements may not have been met by pre-college studies and that additional courses in foreign language, science, and the social sciences may be required. Within the University System of Georgia, for example, deficiencies in the College Preparatory Curriculum (CPC) may sometimes be met with specially designed non-credit courses or college level courses required in addition to the core curriculum requirements. Frequently this need for developmental or CPC work is unforeseen by the student. Consequently, negative self-perceptions and feelings of marginality and anxiety are intensified. This is compounded in many cases by a feeling of urgency and a need to complete all requirements as swiftly as possible. (These time frames may be self-imposed or employment related.) It is therefore necessary to address these perceptions and expectations in the developmental studies program, through a sound academic advisement program and academic and personal support services.

To further prepare nontraditional students and perhaps eliminate some of the developmental work required after entry, a non-credit summer preparatory program could be implemented in lieu of or in addition to the first term seminar. Such a program could target the incoming older student, providing a summer seminar that would address areas of needed remediation, study skills, test taking skills and test anxiety, counseling, academic advisement, and a thorough introduction to the college campus and available support services. In addition to the academic elements of the program, a non-credit seminar exclusively for nontraditional students would facilitate networking among students that would continue to benefit the students after exiting the summer program. Day care arrangements, transportation, and work-study positions on campus would allay some of the anxieties frequently experienced by nontraditional students.

The diversity of older students' agendas, responsibilities, and expectations limit involvement in campus activities; subsequently reducing integration into college life and commitment to the institution. According to Murray, Tanner, and Graves (1990), this combination of unrealistic expectations, lack of involvement, and poor academic performance during the first year of college contributes to the high attrition rate among older students. Murray et al. suggest that to counterbalance the unbalanced attrition levels, postsecondary institutions need to integrate non-traditional students into all aspects of college or university life. It is therefore imperative that program planners carefully consider time when planning and scheduling educational activities.

Proven strategies such as varied and flexible scheduling, distance learning, and self-paced instruction can be utilized to effectively increase accessibility to older learners (Valentine & Darkenwald, 1990). It should also be noted that special needs are not limited to academic areas, but also exist in terms of child care, housing, transportation, and financial aid. For example, child care is generally available on or off campus during the traditional business hours of 7:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. However, these time periods do not allow for extended class or laboratory hours or evening or weekend classes. Day care provided on campus or through a private organization that incorporates evening and weekend hours would facilitate access to and retention of nontraditional students. In addition to class or lab time, extended day care hours would also allow for more involvement in campus activities such as participation in student government, campus productions, social and academic organizations, and other campus life activities that would increase the benefits of the college experience not only for the students, but also for the educational institution and the community in general.

In his opening address to the 1991 Summer Kellogg Institute at Appalachian State University, Hunter Boylan emphatically stated, All programs who work with nontraditional students have one, and only one, bottom line. And that to make opportunity a reality rather than an abstraction, a fact rather than a noble fiction, an outcome rather than a piece of legislation. Various kinds of programs may try to get to that bottom line by different means, but they all cherish the same truth. And that truth is this nation shall not long survive unless we create a generation of college graduates who more closely represent the demographic of American society, unless we do a better job of educating all those who might profit from it, instead of those who can afford it.

The graying of America has had a powerful impact on all segments of American society including businesses, government, health care, and education. With this changing demographic picture come challenges and opportunities for postsecondary education. As the gatekeepers of many career positions and the facilitators of lifelong learning, institutions of higher education must expand their mission, vision, curriculum, and services to meet the needs of the "new student" population and reopen the missed "Window of Opportunity" for the adult student.

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