

Barriers in Returning to Learning: Engagement and Support of Adult Learners

Karyn E. Rabourn
Rick Shoup
Allison BrckaLorenz



Adult Learners and Your Campus

What conversations are you having about adult learners on your campus?

What successes/challenges does your campus have related to adult learners?

Overview

- Characteristics of adult learners
- Purpose and research questions
- Study methods
- Study results
- Discussion and questions

Who are Adult Learners?

- Traditional
 - 18-24 years old
 - 58% of enrollment
- Adult
 - Over the age of 21 at first entry *or*
 - Over the age of 24
- Rapidly growing population
 - Adult learners growing at a faster rate
- Often referred to as 'nontraditional'
 - Delayed enrollment after high school
 - Part-time enrolled in higher education
 - Full-time employed
 - Financially independent
 - Caring for dependents
 - May not have completed high school

Needs and Constraints

- Adult learners are self-directed, have an extensive depth of experience, are ready to learn, and are task motivated (Knowles, 1984)
- They have focused educational goals, often pursuing vocational credentials
- Potentially the most time-limited student subpopulation
 - Degree completion rate is significantly reduced (16.9% versus 53.9% for traditional students)
- Course location, time, and cost

Educational Barriers

- Potentially greater anxieties and lower self-efficacy than traditional students, particularly related to math and technology
- Greater intrinsic motivation to learn may not translate to confidence in the classroom
- Adult learners may need more focus on personal and professional utility
- Blended, hybrid, and online courses may be too detached from hands-on experience

Purpose

Given the rapid growth of adult learners and the lack of knowledge about their engagement in educationally effective practices, our purpose is twofold:

1. Document the characteristics of today's adult learners
2. Expand our understanding of the engagement of today's adult learners

Research Questions

1. What characteristics distinguish adult learners from their traditional-aged peers?
2. How do today's adult learners engage academically?
3. How do today's adult learners interact with their traditional-aged peers, their faculty, and their campus?

Data

- 2013 and 2014 administrations of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE)
 - An annual survey of first-year and senior students measuring their participation in educationally effective experiences
 - 640 U.S. institutions participated in NSSE in 2014 with an average response rate of 32%
 - 586 U.S. institutions participated in 2013 with an average response rate of 30%

Sample

- 146,072 students from 977 U.S. institutions that participated in NSSE 2013 or 2014
 - 2014 data used if an institution participated in both years
- Adult learners are students who are 21 or older (first-year only)
 - 12,336 (8% of sample)

Sample (continued)

- 66% female
- 65% White
 - 7% Black/African American
 - 7% Asian
 - 8% Hispanic/Latino
- 96% full-time
- 41% first-generation
- 30% aspire to bachelor's degree
- 9% started college elsewhere
- 13% taking at least some classes online
- 70% live on or near campus

Sample (continued)

- 44% private control
- 1% mostly online
- 42% Master's-granting colleges & universities
 - 20% bachelor's-granting
 - 35% doctoral universities
- 42% very large (10,000 or more)
 - 20% large (5,000-9,999)
 - 35% medium-small (1,000-4,999)
 - 4% very small (less than 1,000)

Measures

- Higher-Order Learning
- Reflective & Integrative Learning
- Learning Strategies
- Quantitative Reasoning
- Collaborative Learning
- Discussions with Diverse Others
- Student-Faculty Interaction
- Effective Teaching Practices
- Quality of Interactions
- Supportive Environment

- Controls: sex; race; first-generation; degree aspiration; transfer; enrollment; on/off campus; online courses; major/s; time spent working, caring for dependents, and commuting. Control and institution size.

Analyses

- Descriptive analysis of demographics and institution characteristics by adult learner status
- OLS regressions
 1. Adult learner status as outcome, demographic and institution characteristics as predictors
 2. Els as outcomes, adult learner status as an independent measure, demographic and institution characteristics as controls

Results: What characteristics distinguish adult learners from their traditional-aged peers?

- Overrepresentation
 - First-generation
 - Non-white
 - Lower degree aspirations
 - Business majors
 - Attended for profit institutions
 - Attended online institutions
 - Attended less-than-competitive institutions
- Strongest predictors:
 - Online courses
 - Began their education elsewhere
 - Part-time student
 - Living off campus

Results: How are today's adult learners engaged academically?

- Higher-Order Learning
- Reflective & Integrative Learning
- Learning Strategies
- Quantitative Reasoning

In which areas do you think adult learners will be more engaged? Less engaged?

Results: How are today's adult learners engaged academically?

	Effect	Sig.
Higher-Order Learning	+	***
Reflective & Integrative Learning	+	*
Learning Strategies	++	***
Quantitative Reasoning	--	***

Key: * p < .05, *** p < .001
 + B > 0, ++ B > .1, +++ B > .2
 - B < 0, -- B < -.1, --- B < -.2

Results: How much are today's adult learners interacting with their traditional-aged peers, their faculty, and their campus?

- Collaborative Learning
- Discussions with Diverse Others
- Student-Faculty Interaction
- Effective Teaching Practices
- Quality of Interactions
- Supportive Environment

In which areas do you think adult learners will be more engaged? Less engaged?

Results: How much are today's adult learners interacting with their traditional-aged peers, their faculty, and their campus?

	Effect	Sig.
Collaborative Learning	---	***
Discussions with Diverse Others	-	***
Student-Faculty Interaction	--	***
Effective Teaching Practices	++	***
Quality of Interactions	+++	***
Supportive Environment	--	***

Key: * $p < .05$, *** $p < .001$
 + B > 0, ++ B > .1, +++ B > .2
 - B < 0, -- B < .1, --- B < .2

Discussion

- Adult learners
 - Pursue flexible educational offerings
 - Have other responsibilities
 - Are diverse
 - Are drawn to different types of institutions
 - Have specific educational goals in mind
- Adult learners
 - Have high levels of academic engagement
 - Quantitative Reasoning is an exception
 - Interact less with peers and faculty
 - Have positive perceptions of teaching practices and interactions with others
 - Find their campus to be less supportive

Discussion

What questions does this raise for you?

Action

What is one thing you could do to learn more about the adult learners on your campus?

What is one thing you could do to make a positive change for the adult learners on your campus?



Thank you!

This presentation, the full paper, and more information about NSSE can be found at

nsse.indiana.edu

tshoup@indiana.edu