DOCUMENT RESUME

ABSTRACT
        A study was conducted by the Appalachia Educational
Laboratory (AEL) to determine impediments to and facilitators of
adult students' success during their first semester of attendance at
a community college and to recommend interventions which would
minimize the difficulties of returning adults as they attempt to
manage the learning process. The target population for the study
consisted of 70 Appalachia region community college students, ranging
in age from 22 to 57, who had no prior postsecondary educational
experience and were enrolled in at least two major-related courses.
Data collection involved in-depth interviews with all students in the
sample, observations of a sample of classes in which target students
were commonly enrolled, and daily logs filled out by the enrolled
students for 1 week during the second month of the semester. The
study found that students' attempts to manage the learning process
were affected by issues related to finances, home and family,
transportation, unique personal factors, goals and commitment,
academic adjustment, the classroom, and the institution. Based on
study findings, a number of interventions were suggested to AEL
region schools to: (1) help adult students with their problems
outside of school (e.g., college-sponsored child-care centers, adult
student support groups, and in-service training to sensitize student
personnel workers to adult students' problems); (2) improve the
classroom experience (e.g., in-service teacher training to promote
course organization around a detailed syllabus, thorough explanation
and review in class, in-class dialog, and heightened sensitivity to
the special needs of adults); and (3) improve academic services at
the institutional level (e.g., more thorough counseling at time of
enrollment, provision of more information about majors and careers in
introductory courses, more mandatory advising sessions, and closer
assessment of skill levels). (EJV)

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Adult Students in Community College:
Learning to Manage the Learning Process

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## INTRODUCTION

During the last 15 years an increasing number of adults have chosen to pursue post-secondary schooling for the first time by enrolling in a community college. This increase has come to represent, for community college educators, the presence of a special set of problems and challenges. It is my hope that this paper offers i formation and advice which will help community college educators understand and aid their adult students during the all-important first semester in school.

The goal of many returning adult students is to achieve, through education, a major transition with regard to their employability and/or personal lives. In addition, many adult students pursue this goal in the shadow of employment problems, limited academic backgrounds, long periods out of school, and patterns of lifestyle and family responsibility that are resistant to change (Duffy and Fendt, 1984; Goldberg, 1980; Governanti and Ciowes, 1982; Porter, 1970). As a result, adult students often face, in their return to school, problems somewhat different from those of younger students. They often experience, for example: extreme anxiety and a lack of confidence (Griswold, 1971; Porter, 1970), serious conflicts among their home, work and school responsibilities (Porter, 1970), substantial resistance from significant others (Porter, 1970), and longstanding basic skill deficiencies (Lu nbill and McCabe, 1978). They may also be reluctant and have little time to pai .cipate in remedial or special support programs (Friedlander, 1981), and they may fir certain standard institutional and instructional practices unfamiliar and/or alienating. In general, the adult student experience in community college can be a difficult and frustrating one, and if high rates of attrition are any indication (see Astin, 1975; Pantages and Creedon, 1978; Peng, Ashburn and Dunteman, 1977) the experience represents a point of concern not only for the students but for community college educators as well.

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The purpose of this paper is to report some of the findings and recommendations
of a descriptive study conducted by the Appalachia Educational Laboratory (AEL)
concerning the impediments to and facilitators of adult students' success during the
first semester of community college.  While the research literature offers a general
sense of the problems adult students may have in community college, it fails to
provide much in the way of first hand information about the lives of these students.
It also offers few specific recommendations to community college educators concerning
how these students might best be helped as they attempt to adjust to being in school
(see Duffy and Fendt, 1984; Gates and Creamer, 1984 in support of this point).  For
this reason and because of a special need in the region it serves, the AEL Lifelong
Learning Program set out in 1981 to analyze in detail the experiences of adults who,
with no prior post-secondary education, enroll in community college in hopes of
improving their employability.  In the AEL region inclusive of West Virginia,
southwestern Virginia, southern Ohio, eastern Kentucky and northeastern Tennessee,
students of this type are common, due to high rates of unemployment and a poor
regional economy, and they are often in need of substantial help as they try to meet
the demands of school.

BACKGROUND

    Early in the project, AEL staff conducted exploratory interviews and a review of
the vocational development literature.  This led to the construction of a five-stage
sequence assumed to represent the general steps target adults must complete in order
to achieve their goal.  This sequence consists of:  1) making a commitment to return
to school, 2) learning to manage the learning process, 3) developing subject matter
competence, 4) planning for employment, and 5) becoming employed.  These five stages
represent the five phases of the project, two of which are now complete and three of

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which remain.  The overall goal of the project is to analyze and improve each step of the adult student community college experience.

What this paper reports are the major findings and recommendations associated with phase two of the project, which concerns the students' first semester in school.[1]  During the first semester of community college, adult students are often faced with a difficult period of adjustment.  If they are to be successful, they must:  get accustomed to college classroom instruction and formal evaluation, adapt to a new social environment, organize their time and resources in new ways, and learn to balance a variety of often complex and competing commitments.  This is the process labeled in the AEL study, "learning to manage the learning process."  It is, for adults with no college experience, a critical period which determines how and even whether they will proceed in their community college programs.  It is the time when skills must be developed and internalized which will allow the student to move away from an early preoccupation with the process of learning toward a focus on the content of learning.

The purpose of phase two of the AEL study was:  1) to identify the major impediments to and facilitators of adult students' success during the first three months of school, and 2) to recommend, on the basis of the research and meetings with community college administrators and faculty from schools in the AEL region, interventions which would minimize the difficulties of returning adults as they attempt to manage the learning process.  The assumption was that this would not only increase the chances of adult students successfully completing a community college program, but that it would also contribute to the target population's development of some of the skills and self-confidence required to pursue meaningful, self-directed learning outside of school.

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## METHODS AND DATA SOURCES

The target population for this study consisted of Appalachia region community college students who: 1) were twenty-two or older at the time they started school, 2) had no prior post-secondary educational experience, and 3) were enrolled in at least two major-related courses totaling six credit hours or more. A random sample of students was drawn from members of this population in two Appalachia region community colleges, and qualitative methods were employed to analyze the experiences of these students during their first three months of school. The sample consisted of 70 students ranging in age from 22 to 57. Forty-six of these students (19 females and six males at school A and nine females and 12 males at school B) were enrolled throughout the first semester, while 24 (seven females and two males at school A and seven females and eight males at school B) either withdrew during the early weeks or never actually started classes after registering.

The collection of data involved a triangulation of methods. There were in-depth interviews with all students in the sample, observations of a sample of classes in which target students were commonly enrolled, and daily logs filled out by the enrolled students for one week during the second month of the semester. The interviews were designed to elicit information about a broad range of personal, family, financial and institutional factors which pilot work had suggested were key elements in the attempts of adult students to manage the learning process. The interviews were recorded and transcribed, then a qualitative analysis was conducted to identify themes and patterns relevant to the study's objectives.

Classroom observations were conducted in 17 classes with high concentrations of target students. These observations occurred five times in each class during the research period, and they focused on such aspects of classroom life as: the teacher's style of management, typical learning behaviors, modes of questioning and

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communication, social climate, and amounts of time spent in various activities.  The
purpose of these observations was to develop general descriptions of typical learning
situations encountered by target adults; it was not to gather data about individual
students in the study.  Thus, for each class observed a summary descriptive analysis
was produced, and these summaries were used to add depth to the interview analysis.

In addition to the interviews and classroom observations, students in the sample
who were still enrolled after six weeks were asked to fill out daily logs for one
week.  In these logs the students recorded what they did each hour of each day.  The
goal was to get a sense of how different students spent and organized their time.
Once the logs were completed they were analyzed for naturally occurring categories of
activity, and this information was then considered in light of the interview reports
for the purpose of exploring how time use and its various reported influences (e.g.
marital status, gender-related family responsibilities, number of children, age,
relationship with spouse/family, etc.) might be linked to performance in school.  As
with the observations, the daily log data were used as a check and balance for the
interview data.


## RESULTS

Analysis of the interview, classroom, and daily log data revealed eight key
categories of factors which influenced the students' attempts to manage the learning
process.  Although these categories are discussed somewhat separately here, it is
important to note that they are closely interrelated in the lives of the students.
They represent major strands in the complex cloth of the students' community college
experience.  The eight categories are:

* Economic Issues
* Home and Family Issues
* Transportation Issues
* Unique Personal Issues

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* Goal and Commitment Issues
* Academic Adjustment Issues
* Classroom Issues
* Institutional Issues

What follows is a discussion of these categories in terms of the impediments and facilitators associated with each.[2] Ultimately, on the basis of this analysis and a response to it by selected administrators and faculty from nine AEL region community colleges, recommendations are offered regarding how community colleges might help a greater number of adult students succeed during their first semester of school.

## Economic Issues

Impediments - There is little doubt that financial issues were a source of great concern for many of the students in the study. The most direct evidence of this is the fact that a lack of tuition money kept three interviewed subjects from even starting school. In all three cases the students had counted on financial aid or grant money which did not come through. The most distressing of these situations was a case in which a young divorced woman with two young children suffered the "Catch 22" of: 1) not qualifying for financial aid because she held a full-time job, and 2) not being able to cover both school and family expenses with the low wage of her work. Thus, she was forced to forego school, the one thing she felt would increase her employability and capacity for independence.

In eight other cases students withdrew from school early in the semester, at least in part, because of limited funds. For some of these students the non-economic problems and frustrations they experienced as a result of school were exacerbated by tight finances. Given these difficulties, the expense and economic sacrifices associated with school seemed a poor investment. For other students who withdrew, school and its financial strain simply could not compete with an offer of full-time work. These students dropped out to take jobs.

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Economic issues also caused problems for those students who remained in school. In the interest of supporting themselves, and possibly a family, a number of students held substantial part-time jobs while going to school full time. This sometimes put a serious strain on scheduling.[3] A 22 year old male, who was working 30 hours a week and carrying a full load of courses, said,

> Oh, it's hard trying to go to school and working too. I'm
> working part-time and going to school at the same time. It just,
> you know, it just doesn't hit right, trying to do everything.
> You have to try to do everything you possibly can in the time you
> get off before you go to work, you know. When you have to study.
> you gotta cram it in and make time for it to really get it. It's
> hard ... but I need the job.

This student eventually dropped one course, and failed another. Another student, also a 22 year old male, dropped two courses in which he was doing poorly, because, as he said,

> I was working, like, four days a week, and went to this class
> two evenings a week and was in school about all day. I couldn't
> get any studying done.

Another economic problem many of the students faced was a combination of unemployment, limited opportunity, and significant family-care responsibilities. It is not surprising that for at least some of these students academic performance was negatively affected by and took a "back seat" to the desire and need to make money. A number of students reported a disruptive anxiety over the conflict between being in school and not having a job and income, and more than a few of these students considered dropping out.

One woman, 43 years old, whose husband was "laid off" and who did eventually withdraw near the end of the semester to return to her old job, said,

> Financially I couldn't afford not to go back to work, even if
> it's only for three months, because there's too much to lose. I
> don't have any benefits. I haven't had any for over a year now,
> and I have to get some benefits back. Plus, I have my house
> payment, you know, and I need to get caught up there.
> Financially, I just couldn't afford not to go back to work.

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Another student, a man of 33, with a wife and two children, said:

> I guess the biggest problem for me was the financial end of the
> thing. Trying to meet all your bills and feed your family and
> everything else just worries you to death. It makes it hard.
> ... If you're worrying about whether they are going to come and
> get your house or not, come and put you out on the street, or
> come and cut your lights off or anything like that, right there,
> you can't study. ... You get to the point, like, you get people
> expecting all that green stuff out there from you, and you
> haven't got it, and you know if you're going to school you can't
> get it, and you think about dropping out and looking for work.

Thus, the burdens of unemployment, no income, and family financial responsibilities wore heavily on some of those in the sample. At their worst, such burdens were the source of a great deal of anxiety and self-doubt, and they made it difficult to focus on school. Especially among those students who did not want to move from the immediate area and who believed that employment and opportunity in the region were severely limited, there was a pessimism about the impact their community college schooling would have on their employability. This sometimes led these students to withhold effort and determination in their schoolwork.

The financial problems associated with going to school were, thus, not only directly manifest, as in not having enough money for tuition or as in part-time work cutting into study time, but they also appeared as psychological impediments. For those students trying to go to school while experiencing serious financial difficulties there was a tendency to question their commitment to school and to worry about their status in the eyes and lives of significant others. This was

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particularly salient in the lives of students who were parents to families
unsupported by another steady income or who were partners in a financially unstable
marriage. Going to school often accentuated existing financial problems, and this,
in turn, raised serious doubts in the minds of the students and their families about
the return to school.

Facilitators - While a significant number of students in the study found
community college a serious, additional financial burden, many others felt it was
relatively inexpensive and affordable. This was particularly true of those students
whose domestic finances were not already strained and of those who were receiving
financial aid from their school or other sources. For these students the return to
school was often viewed as a "good deal."

A lack of serious financial problems was no guarantee of school success,
although for many it did seem to make the adjustment to school a good bit easier.
Students not pressed for money outside of school (quite often these were either wives
in families supported by the husband's income or younger students still living at
home) had more time for studying and suffered fewer distracting worries than did
those students with significant financial problems. Among these students there were
fewer fears that the time spent in school might be an unwise investment. This
allowed the students to concentrate on school and its challenges with optimism. As
one 22 year old male who was living with his parents said,

> I don't have any bills or anything. I'm staying at home, I'm not
> married ... everything just pointed to go back to school. It
> would be easier now than it would be after I got a good job. I
> bet if I didn't go back to school now ... I probably wouldn't
> have ever. But now that I'm in school I like it, and I'll go on
> for my education.

It is also important to note that financial aid from the students' chosen
schools provided a psychological boost as well as obviously vital tuition money.
Many of the students who received tuition grants and loans would not have been able

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to attend school otherwise and, as a result, they were surprised, pleased and grateful when their aid came through. In this way financial awards fostered a certain amount of pride and self-confidence even before school began; and in the process they produced a sense of responsibility on the part of these students with regard to their own academic success. Being honored financially seemed to contribute to the determination some students possessed as they faced the challenges of returning to school.

Thus, while tuition aid and financial support at home were not necessarily the keys to first semester success, they did in many cases ease the path and offer encouragement. It is true that economic difficulties and related employment goals were often powerful positive motivators for many of these students, but there was a certain level of financial strain and frustration after which school seemed simply too much to bear. It is clear that those students not suffering severe financial stress as they entered school stood a better chance of succeeding.


## Home and Family Issues

Impediments - As with and not unrelated to financial problems, certain non-economic relationships and responsibilities in students' lives suffered in the competition with school. In turn, the students' attempts to succeed at school were often impeded by the difficulties that developed at home.

A common problem for students who were parents was the balancing of childcare and studying. At the most extreme were three mothers of very young children who decided to withdraw early in the semester, either because they were uncomfortable with the amount of time school required they be away from their children, or because they could not arrange their schedule around available babysitters. One of these women put it this way:

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> I decided not to go through with it. My little girl is so young.
> That's one reason I'm going to wait. ... My little girl is a
> year old, and I don't want to even think about it until she gets
> in school, and that would be at least four to five years.
>     ... It had been a while since I had been in high school, and I
> didn't know how much time it really took for studying again. It
> was really taking up a lot of time --it's hard to study with my
> child. And I know going full-time there just wouldn't be much
> time for her.

On another level it was difficult for some students, especially those who were

parents, to find the time and a good place for serious studying. The school

libraries were often not a solution, due both to the socializing that took place in

them and to the limited time the students generally spent at school. In addition,

trying to work at home could be even more problematic, given the variety of

distractions there.

A man of 31, with three small children, discussed the problem in terms of his

children's capacity to distract.

> You know, it's been a problem, some, finding a place to work.
> When I'm at home I try to do a lot of it, but when the kids want
> to play and all, I have to put my books and stuff up and play
> with them. Once I get started with them, they don't want to let
> me quit, so I end up leaving my homework for the library.
>     ... Like this morning, the four year old, she didn't want to
> let me go, you know. I wanted to leave about 8, maybe 8:30, and
> she didn't want to let me go, so I had to sit there another hour
> or so with her before I could come on to school and get some of
> my lab report done.
>     ... When the kids go to sleep that's about the best time that I
> can get into studying. If they're there, then I have to play
> with them. ... I try to write out my reports, try to do my math,
> and they'll watch me--"what's this, what's that," you know. They
> interrupt me, and then I have to quit and sit around and talk to
> them awhile.

And a 29 year old mother of four, whose husband was attending another nearby

college, reported,

> I stay tired. I am constantly tired. ... I think I'm going to
> have to cut out some of the outside activities that I do.
> Football season is just about over, so that's going to take care
> of a lot of time, you know, that I spend running with my
> children. ... I do a lot of laundry and a lot of helping them

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with their homework, too.

... I study whenever supper's over and the TV's off or after
the kids go to bed. They go to bed at 9:30. So, I guess,
really, my study time is anywhere from 10:00 to early in the
morning because there's--well, I get out of school around 2, I
pick up my kids at 3 and run them to the ballfield by 4:30, for
dinner, go back to the ballfield at 7:30 or 8, get baths, get
supper ... go off to bed, and I fix, you know, clear up the
kitchen and then there's a load or two of laundry that needs to
be done, so it's late. I really never have time during the day
to study.

Thus, it is apparent that home distractions and especially childcare and
housework responsibilities interfered significantly with some students' attempts to
concentrate on school and schoolwork. This was especially true for some of the
female students who were both mothers and wives.[4] Even though going to school
required a good deal of their time, their traditional roles in the home often
remained the same. Consistent with much current research regarding working women,
many of the mothers in the sample had to add school to their already substantial
responsibilities. Some were unable to alter previous commitments in their own minds,
and some had husbands who refused to share in the housework and childcare.

Even more importantly, a number of women in the sample faced school in the
shadow of their husbands' antagonism or consciously withheld support. In combination
with the previously cited factors, this made school an exceptional challenge,
requiring not only time, persistence, and stamina, but a firm commitment and
determination in the face of isolation and the threat of a dissolving marriage. The
interview evidence is poignant in this regard.

A 53 year old woman who had two children attending the community college also,
described it this way:

The only problem we have is Dad. He's had superwife and supermom
for 22 years and all at once he's sitting there, you know,
thinking, well, I'm left out of this whole thing. We've tried to
include him, but his attitude is, "I've been to school for
myse'f, and I've been to school for the two children through high
school, and I'm not going to school anymore." He makes little

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remarks about like--when you get your Ph.D. then I can quit work
and, you know, these kind of things. Last year I wanted to come,
and I let him talk me out of it.
      ... But I was determined that I'm going to do this, and I'm
doing it for myself. ... I'll tell you, the only thing that
makes it difficult today is the fact that my husband would rather
I was home. He has this little silly habit of saying could you
come and hold this tool for me, and he's never done that in 20
years. ...While I'm studying, he'll say, hurry, there's
something new here on TV, you know. ...Subconsciously he's
reacting, because he would rather I would just give up the whole
thing. And that does create a problem, because I don't want him
to be distressed.

Another woman, 24 years old and the mother of three, observed,

      I still do the housework _and_ my kids _and_ my husband. Then I wait
for everybody to go to bed. Well, I go to bed when everybody
goes to bed, and then I set the clock for 1 to 3 o'clock in the
morning to get up to do my homework. I don't like to take time
from my family to go to school.
      ... Sometimes I feel guilty about not being at home. Like, if
I have to stay at school and I have to have a sitter for them, I
think, I should be home. I should be there to cook my husband's
supper, you know. Now he's going to have to wait for supper
after working all day. I feel guilty.
      ... My husband, sometimes I wonder about him. He says he
doesn't care, but he rushes me, when I do get home, to get supper
ready, and all evening it's rushed to do the dishes, to get the
kids fed on time, etc.
      ... and when I do go out I say, well, I could be home cleaning
house or spending time with the kids or doing homework. I feel
guilty when I go out. But my husband expects it of me. That's
part of my job as a wife--to go out and keep him company--and so
I feel guilty if I don't go out. So that's a losing battle, I
suppose.
      ... It's not so much what he says; it's the way he says it and
how he acts. It's fine for me to go to school as long as I keep
the house clean, as long as I do everything that I was doing 12
hours a day. It took me 12 hours a day to do it before. Now I'm
cramming 12 hours of work into four hours in the evening, and I
just don't think it meets his standard sometimes.

And, a woman of 43, whose husband was threatening to leave her, put it this way,

      I see right now that school's caused a few problems between me
and my husband, because I've been spending too much time on my
books. ... I'm having trouble at home. That's like a mental
strain on me. As a matter of fact, my husband told me this
morning he was leaving. I don't know if when I get home whether
or not he is leaving. I can't--I mean I don't see the point in
coming if I don't try to make the most out of it.

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... I do most of my studying at home. And, like, usually if I
get home early in the afternoon, if my husband's not home, I
don't have to pick up my little boy till quarter to three, so I
take advantage of that time while I'm there by myself. And, of
course, you know I have spend a certain amount of time with them,
but then, like, after dinner's over with--this is where it's
causing problems between me and my husband. He thinks I should
get all of this in before the little boy goes to bed. That way
it will be our time, but it doesn't always work out that way.
There's just too much to do, too much to study. For someone else
it might be easier, but not for me.
... My husband's laid off now. ... He's pretty selfish the way
I look. I mean, that's what I can't understand, because there
are things that he could do and ways he could help me but he
hasn't. I'm on my own.
... It puts a lot of pressure on me, because I find myself, you
know, if he's away from the house or maybe he's gone fishing ...
I find myself hurrying through something so I can have it out of
the way before he gets back. Or I put it off until I think maybe
he'll go fishing tomorrow or this or that, you know. And so that
keeps me a little uptight there--trying to hurry through it
instead of taking my time at it and relaxing with it. I feel
like I could do a lot better if I could do it that way.

These reports make clear the tension that can exist for adult students between

domestic life and going to school. There is a competition for the students' time and

allegiance, and the students' capacity to fill previous roles in the home necessarily

changes. At its worst this tension can lead to deterioration of the marital

relationship. Non-student husbands in marriages rooted in traditional role-

definitions were sometimes threatened by the new commitments a wife had to make as

she began school. They also felt threatened by the independence school seemed to

require of and bring to their wives. especially if, due to a depressed economy, the

husbands had recently been unemployed. One young woman, 22 years old and the mother

of a three year old boy, touched on this as she explained that her unemployed husband

was opposed to her going to school.

I feel like I'm going at about 50 directions at one. I have a
child. I have to get him off and take him to daycare, then I
have to do laundry, and stuff like that, plus I have so much to
study.
... My husband, we've been married four years, he has maybe
worked six or eight months of the whole time. He's always laid

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off or quitting jobs or something.
... He doesn't want me going to school. He has these, I guess,
dreams that since he hasn't provided for us in the past and
stuff, I'm going to go to school and leave him.

Fathers and husbands who were students had domestic problems, too. School took

away from their time with the children, children interfered with their schoolwork,

and going to school meant they could not be employed full-time. In addition, some

wives were not supportive of their husband's efforts in school. The following report

by a 38 year old married male who was experiencing considerable depression over

unemployment and doing poorly in school, makes this clear.

My wife, I think sometimes she couldn't care one way or another
about my going to school. It does help out paying the bills and
stuff like that--we get money from the VA--but, as far as support
from her, she could care less. ... I feel like a stray tomcat
trying to find a place. I've been kicked out of one place, and
I'm trying to find where I belong in the world.

Nevertheless, female students tended more often to suffer in the competition

between home and school. While male students who were husbands and fathers often

bore the psychological strain of financial problems, female students who were wives

and mothers struggled physically as well as emotionally to add school to their

domestic responsibilities. They experienced extreme demands on their time and psyche

as they attempted to achieve a more secure financial future for themselves and their

families.

At its most basic level the conflict between home and school was rooted in the

fact that going '     ool required a shifting of traditional roles. For people

accustomed to traditional role-definitions in the home, the adjustment to school was

sometimes a difficult one. It tested their capacity to relinquish certain values and

habits while taking on others, and it accentuated conflicts over roles in the home

which may have existed before the students entered school. In short, going to school

brought to a head many issues in the home which had not previously been addressed.

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Facilitators - Given the foregoing information it is not surprising that students pleased with their adjustment to school consistently reported that family encouragement and help were key factors in their success. In these cases relatives and family members took over childcare and housework responsibilities, and children, siblings, spouses, and parents offered enthusiasm and praise. With this kind of support, students were able to see their way through the fears and frustrations of the first semester without losing their commitment and determination.

A 23 year old male noted the importance of his parents' support:

> Mom and Dad, they understand, you know. They like to know how I'm doing all the time, and it makes me feel, you know, a lot better. They're pretty proud of me too, because I started, you know, college and everything. They know I'm really trying hard, the best I can to, you know, to do good. I mean, that helps you a lot to have somebody supporting you.

A 36 year old father of three, who had worked in coal mines for 13 years, attributed his enthusiasm and persistence in school to the encouragement and academic help he was getting from his wife and children. His family was pulling together on his behalf, and this helped keep him going.

> I stay enthused about school, and the only way I've done that is I have had support from my wife. She is behind me saying, "I want you to do your best," and that keeps my energy level high. If I didn't have that it would be real low.
> ... If I hadn't had my wife to sit down at night, you know, ... without her help I couldn't have made it, because I would've said, "Well, this is just too much for me, you know." But she sat down with me and was real patient, went over, you know, the fractions and decimals and things.
> ... I get support from my wife and my family. They say, "We don't want you to go back in the mines. We want you to go on with this whatever the outcome is and try to better yourself and get out of the coal mines and do something better." I remember that when I feel down, you know.

Finally, a number of women noted the importance of the encouragement and housework/childcare help they were receiving from their husbands, relatives, and children:

> My husband is a great help. He helps at home, and he insists
> that the girls help also, because there for so long I did
> everything, and they had to learn that when Mom's gone if you
> want something done or something needs to be done you have to
> rely on yourself instead of her. ... My husband is my biggest
> fan. Basically, it was his encouragement that got me to come to
> school. I always half thought I would like to return, but he was
> so excited about the prospect of me coming back to school that
> it, you know, encouraged me more than anything else to do it.

> My husband is very helpful. He tries to keep the children away
> from me. My children try to help with the housework on Sunday.
> We try to have a schedule ... Now that we're going into exams,
> they will clean for me for the next two weeks. They are very
> helpful ... They really, you know, they're troopers. I've gotta
> give them credit.

> My mother-in-law has been, you know, even with the job she has
> now, taking care of her mother, she has been, you know, great
> about keeping our daughter. My husband, he's cleaned the house,
> you know. Anything to get the kids, take them out for awhile -
> just to give me a little time to study.

It is useful to note that all of the students who reported support at home had
above average grades for the first semester. They also reported greater enthusiasm
for school than did most of the other students interviewed. Thus, it seems that when
a students' return to school is considered a positive family event and effort the
adjustments are easier and the chances for school success are increased. As a 34
year old mother of two summarized:

> I'm having less trouble than I thought I would. ... I think it's
> mostly the support of my family; knowing that they are behind me,
> you know, all the way.

It is apparent, then, that students who enter school with the support of their
families have many advantages. They not only have a network of people willing to
take over some of their previous domestic responsibilities, but they have a broad
base of psychological support provided by the most important people in their lives.
Family encouragement for success in school gives students emotional sustenance and
armor in the face of major challenges and adjustments.

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## Transportation Issues

**Impediments** - As with most community colleges, the schools chosen as research
sites are commuter schools serving rather large areas. It is not surprising, then,
that a number of students in the study had problems with transportation and travel
which made going to school difficult. Especially when combined with financial or
domestic problems, transportation difficulties were a serious impediment.

Of the students interviewed, at least three failed to start or withdrew because
of transportation problems. One woman who had received grant money and was very
excited about starting school had her ride fall through at the last minute. Her son
had "totaled" her car a few weeks before, the woman she had planned to ride with
decided not to continue in school, and there seemed to be no one in her area with a
car and similar schedule. This woman was extremely frustrated and disappointed.
Another woman, who was young, married, and pregnant, "lost" her car due to her
inability to make the payments. As a result, she started school riding the bus run
by the college. This, however, eventually proved unsatisfactory as the bus ran only
at the beginning and end of the day (8 and 3:30), and she was finished with her
classes at noon. With her pregnancy and home responsibilities, the three and a half
hour "wait" for the afternoon bus was "just too much."

Other students relied heavily on friends for rides. In the process, they
compromised their own schedules to suit the needs of the owner of the car. This,
too, made school difficult as it meant wasted time and either an inflexible schedule
or an occasionally uncertain one. A 24 year old woman, with two children in school
expressed this view:

> My husband has to have the car a lot, so I have to depend on
> friends to bring me to and from school. I get stuck over here
> (at school) sometimes and can't get a ride home. And, like, this
> morning, I was late getting here because she (her ride) wasn't
> ready. That's a problem sometimes.

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And, a 22 year old mother and wife talked about her transportation arrangement
this way,

> I have to depend on somebody all the time, and I hate to depend.
> ... She drives me to school, you know, she picks me up--we have
> classes on the same days--she picks me up and then I always wait
> on her two or three hours in the afternoon and then ride back
> home with her.  ... If she would have to drop out or something,
> that would really put a damper on everything.

Thus, travel to and from school was a problem even for some of those who had
scheduled rides.  It was also an impediment for those who lived a long distance from
school.  There were a few students who commuted as much as two hours each way, each
day, to go to school.  This made for a long day and a lot of time considered wasted.
As a result many of these students, too, questioned seriously their commitment to
school.

It seems fair to say, then, that although travel impediments were not as serious
as some other kinds of problems, they did play a significant role in the lives of a
number of students who were already struggling in their attempts to succeed at
school.  For students faced with a variety of more serious difficulties,
transportation and distance problems were factors which made achieving success in
school seem an almost insurmountable challenge.

Facilitators - On the more positive side, it is important to note that both schools
in the study did provide bus service into outlying areas and many students were able
to use the service effectively.  Students who lived relatively close to the bus route
and who had enough flexibility in their work and home lives to plan around the bus
schedule, did find the service important and helpful.  Thus, at least for these
students the school's bus system helped ease the return to school.


Unique Physical and Personal Issues

Impediments - Students also experienced a variety of rather personal

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impediments. Physical and psychological disabilities, personal illness, sickness in
the family, and religious dilemmas all had the potential to interfere significantly
with school. One young woman, for example, withdrew from school after being in the
hospital for several days, because she felt she would be too far behind to catch up.
Another woman, who was 48, the mother of two college-age children, unemployed, and
wife to a man with terminal heart disease, almost dropped out when her husband was
hospitalized, because she missed a lot of classes over a period of four weeks. She
missed both coursework and exams, and the obvious emotional strain made it difficult
to study.

A number of other students entered school with serious physical or psychological
problems. Physical disabilities created some of the most concrete and explicit
barriers to school success. One woman, for example, had very poor vision, even when
wearing glasses. This made seeing the blackboard difficult, even though she sat in
the front, and reading was often a slow and tiring task. Two other students had
severe hearing impairments. Understandably, these students found the commonly
employed lecture format difficult and frustrating. One of them described the problem
this way:

> Well, my hearing is the most difficult part. If you don't hear
> it, you don't understand it ...If they're giving a problem on
> the board, and I just catch it in parts, that messes me up on a
> test; I work it in parts.

A more subtle, although equally as serious, personal problem involved extreme
anxiety and psychological discomfort in response to school and its associated
challenges and adjustments. Almost all students experienced a certain amount of this
in school (e.g. test anxiety, fear of asking questions in class, etc.), but a few
students entered school with an unusually severe problem along these lines. One
student, 35 and an unemployed father and husband, had previously suffered a nervous
breakdown in association with his return from military duty in Viet Nam. At the time

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he started school he still experienced insomnia and an extreme lack of confidence. He saw school as a major threat and challenge; for him, test anxiety and concentrating in class were not small matters.

Another student, a married woman of 27, had developed a diagnosed case of "bad nerves" while working in a factory for eight years. She had finally had to leave the job, and this was the primary reason she was "back in school." Again, her fear of tests and failure and her frustration with deadlines was much more severe than for most other students. At times she was almost incapacitated.

Finally, a few students experienced in school a major conflict between their religious beliefs and what they felt was being taught and happening socially. This was, generally, not a serious impediment, but for one student, it was almost cause for withdrawal from school. She changed sociology teachers and sought a great deal of religious advice as she struggled with the problem.

> There was a lot of noise; there was a lot of people going in every direction and nobody really seemed to be getting anything done. There was a lot of cursing, things that didn't appeal to me right off, and God's a very important part of my life, and ... everywhere I looked didn't seem to have anything to do with God.
> ... I had this mental block with sociology. If I did well in sociology I was compromising what I believed in my religion ... I had a large problem with that ... Sociology is the study of society — what society says. There are a lot of sociologists that believe what society says goes, whether it's biblically right or not.
> ... The second day of school here I was ready to just cry. I mean, I was just at the panic point. I didn't know where to go, what to do.
> ... Outside of school I had no friends that did not go to church or were not Christians. I did nothing that wasn't associated with the church.

Thus, it is apparent that barriers to school success come in many forms, some more or less dramatic or discernible than others. Nevertheless the personal and unique problems some students experienced in relation to school were just as serious, for the students involved, as many of the difficulties encountered by a larger number

of students.

Facilitators - In general, there were few facilitators of success for the people
with the special problems discussed here.  Many of these students did do poorly in
school and/or they dropped out.  Some did succeed, though, and for this success there
seemed two main reasons.  First, the problems of successful students did not involve
the kind of direct physical limitations which make classroom learning difficult.
Their problems tended to be psychological.  Secondly, these students received
constant and supportive counseling throughout the period of the research.  There is
no doubt that having someone to turn to for advice and commiseration helped keep
these students enrolled and focused.  In the case of the woman who experienced a
religious conflict, for example, finding a similarly religious faculty member who was
understanding and encouraging made the difference between staying and leaving.  Thus,
special counseling and advice did make a significant difference for some of the
students with unique personal problems.


## Goal and Commitment Issues

Impediments - Another important, yet often indiscernible, impediment to school
success was an unclear commitment to school.  Commitment is a difficult state of mind
to assess, and an association between a lack of commitment and problems in school was
not always clear; nevertheless, there were a few cases in which a lack of school-
dependent goals seemed associated with poor academic performance.  This was,
primarily, a problem of unemployed students in their 30's and 40's who would much
rather have been working than going to school.  These students were often enrolled in
school either as a result of having been laid off then funded for school by their
employer or as a last resort after years of chronic unemployment.  In both situations
the students had little optimism that school would make a significant difference in

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their employability or life condition.

A 38 year old married man, who had a child and was doing very poorly in school,
serves as a caslong.e in point.

> I hope to get through ... and get a job somewhere. I've been out
> of work too long. All I've known is work. ... And, that's about
> the only way I know to learn. ... The way I learn a lot is to be
> right in the middle of it doing it -- experience.
> ... I came back to school, because I couldn't find a job
> anywhere. I went to every place I could find. They gave me the
> same story -- not hiring, laying off, or shutting down. ...So I
> came over here and I said, well, if I can't get a job anywhere
> else I might as well try to go to school.
> ... I would like to get a job and be doing something.
> Sometimes just coming to school is getting on my nerves.
> ... I would rather be working than going to school. The way I
> look at it, at a job I would be doing something. I would be
> busy, keep busy with my hands more than I would with the way I am
> going to school. ... I don't feel like I'm going anyplace.

Thus, a lack of positive and specific reasons for being in school was a problem.
Students going to school by default had little vested interest in school success; as
a result they displayed little motivation and effort. School was just something to
do to occupy time.

Facilitators - Although a student's level of commitment is somewhat intangible,
the interviews do make clear that those students who entered school with personal and
financial goals plus enthusiasm and determination were more likely to succeed both
emotionally and academically than those students who entered with only a vague hope
that school would improve their employability.

The most common reason successful adult students entered community college was
to increase their opportunity with regard to employment and job advancement. Some
students were trying to get out of the clutches of unemployment; some were trying to
move away from what they felt was a category of low paying, boring work ("hamburger
work", as one student called it); and others were attempting to re-enter the work
force after years away from it (these were primarily housewives). Such employment

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goals and motivations were central to the determination necessary to succeed in

school.

For example, a 43 year old wife and mother who had just been laid off, said:

> I think, just knowing that if I get through this I might have a
> chance of getting a decent job, making decent money, I think that
> is what really made me want this.
> ... You know I got this chance, and I thought, well, you know,
> I'm going to make the best of it and try to take advantage of it
> to the fullest extent, you know.

A 22 year old male who was dissatisfied with his gas station job observed,

> I think it was good I stayed out of school a year or two, because
> it really showed me, you know, the value of having a good job,
> because it's hard to save up.  ...Schooling is a lot to get a
> oood job.  I need a good job, you know, I think about getting
> married, buying me a sports car and everything, and there was no
> place out there I could get a job that would help me do that.

Employment goals were not the only motivators driving students to success,

though.  There were also those students who saw the return to school as a chance to

do something with and for themselves.  This did, of course, have an economic

component, but it also had a more abstract developmental meaning.  There were, for

example, a number of women who entered school in order to get "out of the house."

For them, school and the prospect of a job were pleasant alternatives to "soap operas

and boring housework."  It also meant self-esteem.

> Well, I missed getting out.  You get married and you get a baby,
> you're right there at the house.  ... I was getting stale.

> I feel like I'm doing something with my life now.  I don't feel
> like I'm just, you know, staying at home and playing, you know,
> "the bitch."  I feel like I'm accomplishing something.

In addition, there were those students who had wanted to go to college for some

time but had not been able to schedule or afford it.  These students generally

entered school with enthusiasm and a clear idea of what they wanted to achieve.  For

them going to school was a privilege.

> I've really been wanting to go back for awhile.  I've got three

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children at home so I had to wait until my baby jot - she'll be
two this month. ... Before ever had children I thought about
it and of course you have to wait. ... I've thought about it
for quite a few years.

This is my life's ambition (to become a nurse). I think since I
was a child, it's been a life ambition. ... I'm not going to
give up on it. This is what I want to do.

A d so, having goals and strong motivations, regardless of whether they were

purely economic or partly personal and self-worth oriented, seemed to contribute to

students success in school. These students seemed to possess a determination rooted

in optimism and self-confidence, and this determination was an all important factor

capable of helping students through very rough times.

One young mother, for example, had a husband who was opposed to her going to

school and who had been chronically unemploy since the birth of their three year

old son. As a result of these problems she was determined. Despite these problems

she remained self-confident and optimistic.

I'm doing it, because I want to do it with all my heart. ...It's
going to work out, because I'm not only doing it for myself, but
I'm doing it for my little boy who's going to have something.
I'll be working and things, but I know that he'll have the things
in life he needs.

This woman had a 3.7 average at the r d of the semester. Other successful students

said things like:

I'm going to make it through some way or another. I'm going to
be kicking my heels together and getting through it.

I've never thought of dropping out. I'm determined. I'm
determined to get at least an associate degree .n something.

You've got to want to learn. If you don't want to learn it's not
going to be any benefit to you at all. Life's what you make of
it. If I want to sit here and be happy with C's, then that's all
I'm going to get is C's. F:t I've got to strive for the A and
hope I get a B out of it, you know.

What the interviews indicate, then, is that goals provided the requisite

direction while optimism and self-confidence provided the necessary drive and

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resilience as students faced a variety of challenges and frustrations during their
first semester. Even successful students encountered all sorts of fears and
setbacks. Without goals, determination, optimism, and flexibility successful
students would have been much less capable of coping.


## Academic Adjustment Issues

Impediments - As noted in the previous sections almost all the students in the
sample experienced a certain amount of difficulty in their lives as they adjusted to
b ng in school. This was especially true as students encountered and attempted to
deal with the events and responsibilities of school itself. There were classes to
attend, notes to take, texts to read, papers to write, homework to prepare, exams to
do, assignments to hand-in, discussions to take part in, teachers to figure out and,
strangers to meet. All of these things represented pressure and fear.

The difficulty most commonly reported by these students, with regard to school
itself, involved adjusting to the new routine. Students said things like:

> It's hard to get back into the swing of school.

> It's coming along, but, I guess it's taking a lot of extra effort
> to get back in the groove - to get used to going to school and
> everything; reading assignments and homework - just things I
> haven't been responsible for, for awhile.

> It was hard to adapt after all these years, coming back and, you
> know, trying to get into a schedule like that. Mostly it's a
> problem of getting yourself oriented ... just getting back into
> the rhythm of going to school. It's been a long time.

Students also referred often to their initial uneasiness with being "an older
student." They expressed a general "age discomfort," afraid they were "ou of shape"
and insecure that they were behind the conventional schedule for beginning college.
In addition, they complained about the distracting lack of seriousness displayed by
many of the students who were "just out of high school."

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> I was pretty scared for a couple of weeks, you know. I mean ...
> you been out of school for 25 years and you're back to school and
> everything. It's like starting in the first grade all over
> again.
>
> I felt strange at first, like, most of these people nere I went
> to high school with, but they were in grades way behind me and
> everything like that. It feels funny going here to school with
> them, being a freshman with them and stuff like that.
>
> It's a weird experienne, really. You know, one of the hardest
> things I find to do is to accept the fact that I'm a 32 year old
> college freshman, and a lot of people I meet here is, like, 17,
> 18, 19 year olds. You know, that's a hard thing to accept. I
> feel like I'm a daddy to some of these kids, because see my son
> will be 13 in February.
>
> It's hard to get back into it again, because you're around these
> younger people. You see them goofing around and stuff, and
> you're here to learn and, like, they are here to kill time, you
> know.

Ultimately, however, these problems were not considered very serious

impediments. Of greater importance to students were their problems with s'udying.

The necessary self-discipline was difficult, and figuring out what and how to study

was even harder For some students it was a matter of having come to school with

"rusty" skills. For other, it was a problem of never having developed the skills in

the first place. Thus, the first semester, and especially the first few weeks, were

a time when many students s'ruggled to renew and develop a repertoire of effective

study habits and skills.

Generally, students described the problem in terms of a lack of self-

discipline.

> The most difficult thing, I guess, has been teaching myself to
> study again. Getting back into studying or making sure I've got
> this or that in, you know. You're in college, it's a lot of
> self-reliance.
>
> I would be sitting home and didn't have anything to do and would
> be studying and, you know, after 15 or 20 minutes I might get a
> little bored with it, and I would go have a beer or something,
> and it's been hard to break that habit, because I've never been
> tied down like this since 1970 or something.

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More specifically, students talked about the problems of figuring out what and how to study. What information to include in their notes on lectures and reading and what material to focus on and how to study it in a memorable way, when studying for tests, were the key dilemmas. There was a constant fear, on the part of some students, that their notes were poorly organized or incomplete.

> I'm not too good at taking notes. I can't tell what's important to take down. That's something I have difficulty with.

> I've had to do very little notetaking on my job; see, I was shown how to do the job. If they needed anything extra, they would write me down a note and give it to me and then I would just follow their instructions. But having to write it down myself, I'm sitting there wondering what I should take down and what I should omit.

> Taking notes, I usually try to take down everything that the teacher says, which is bad, because you really should just get down the main points and then that summarizes what the whole thing's about ... I write down too much and then all it does is tire you out ... and you don't really know what the main point is.

This difficulty with notetaking skills carried over into students' preparation for exams. Especially early in the semester many students had difficulty figuring out what material would be covered on tests. Similarly, they did not know how best to study so that information "stick" and be available through recall during an exam.

> You study for a lot of stuff and you learn it, and then when it comes to the test, it's on this other stuff, you know. You wouldn't of thought it would even be on the test. I mean, the important stuff you study, but the unimportant stuff is what would be on the test.

> I told her (the teacher), you know, I said, for as much as I studied, you know, well, I thought I should have done a lot better ... She didn't even ask the real hard things that I thought she was going to ask. It was the little ole simple things that you didn't really pay much attention to when you were studying.

Being unsure of what and how to study, especially for exams, may have been the new adult students' most universally anxiety-producing impediment. It contributed

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significantly to their fear of being tested. Given their backgrounds and

aspirations, many of these students entered school with explicit fears of failure and

personal inadequacy. Exams and the mystery of studying for them brought this fear to

a head, producing for some a debilitating level of test anxiety. Thus, many students

not only had to deal with the challenge of leaning the course material, but they had

to struggle as well with the physical and psychological repercussions of the anxiety

associated with being tested.

> I get sick to my stomach. I really do. I get real nervous. On
> my first exam I was so sick I thought I was going to pass out. I
> really did. ... I was so scared I thought for sure I was going
> to pass out. I was sweating, my heartbeat was fast; I do that in
> all my exams. You know, when I get ready to have an exam, I get
> sick to my stomach. I get butterflies and shaky and sweaty.

> I go into a panic. I get very nervous before I take a test. And
> I get sick to my stomach afterwards. Sociology I think scares me
> the worst, because I just can't comprehend it. ... Last week,
> when I was going to get the results of my test, in driving to
> school ... I had to stop alongside the highway and throw up
> before I even made it to school.

> I go totally blank on tests. I panic. I feel uncomfortable when
> I get ready to take a test. I'll know it (the material), but
> when I get in there and read the questions and try and answer
> them, I just go blank, totally blank.

Thus, the fear of failure was a serious problem for many students. Especially

as manifest in the students' test anxiety, it produced psychological and physical

barriers to success and had the potential to be a self-fulfilling prophecy. It is

important to note that the students' burden along these lines reached peak levels

when exams were bunched together within a 2-5 day period. This was a fairly common

occurrence as teachers tended to organize their courses around standard time blocks

involving a similar number of evenly spaced exams. During such periods the students

experienced an unusual amount of pressure and anxiety, seriously testing their study

skills and commitment to school. There is evidence that it was just this kind of

pressure that caused one student to drop out. This student said:

It was so hectic trying to do it all at once that I just couldn't stand it no more, you know ... I just felt like I was getting farther behind. I should have, I guess, kept on going, but you know how it is when you're up at midnight and up at 3 and you're still sitting there dumbfounded, like, it's a good time to quit. ...I just felt like I was getting farther behind. I might have made it to the end and got the grades to pass, but I still knew that I wasn't you know, you just about half do something and get the job done but you're still not doing what you ought to do. ... I just kept feeling, you know, like this is too much.

Another student described the problem this way:

Well, in the first weeks, the mid-term exams came up and, of course, along with your other studies, you had to meet those studies plus your exams. I was kind of rushed during that time trying to work them in. I still had my schedule, and I had certain things I just had to do at that time, and some of the exams I didn't even get to study for much until I got to school during a free break. And then I went right to class and took it, so it did get pretty tough right during exam time. And so, when it came up - I had two tests in one day - I flunked one and got a C on the other one. ... It helps to not put so much on me at one time

The fear of failure and personal inadequacy created other less obvious or dramatic barriers to success as well. It was, for example, the cause of many students' fear of participating in discussions and asking questions in class. Over half of the students interviewed reported that they were afraid of saying or asking "something dumb" in class. This inhibited their ability to clear up questions or learning problems as they occurred. Understandably it also seemed associated with some students' academic performance. Those students who were the most afraid of speaking up in class also received rather poor grades at the end of the semester.

The fear of failure also contributed to the depressed and pessimistic view some new students developed in response to failing grades they received early in the semester. Some of the students who did poorly in their first major exams or papers lost much of the optimism and enthusiasm that had motivated them to start school. As the feared failures actually developed some students began to accept themselves as poor students. In short, failure early on was often an impediment to later success,

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because it affected students' effort and their attitudes toward themselves and school.

> Schools's pretty tough. I feel that I should make a better grade on a lot of the tests I've taken, because for the amount of studying I do, I just, the tests just aren't what, you know, up to my expectations. ...Its just me, I guess. You know, sometimes they give a lot of stuff that they've given you and then other times they just give you stuff you haven't paid much attention to. ...It's just been study, study, study and then you come up and don't do any better then what you do, you know. I just think it should, it just doesn't seem fair to yourself, you know, with all of the work you have put into it.

> At first I thought of dropping out. ... The first two weeks I thought it was too hard. I thought I couldn't make it. ...Like I said (before), history didn't hit too good. (He failed the first two tests.) That's the first time I had - the first test I had was history and I said, "Oh shoot." I saw that and I said, "Oh shoot, the other tests are going to be t'e same way."

> I've thought about dropping out at least a hundred times. Like I said, I was bringing home very oad grades on my papers. I thought, hey, I don't need to come up here to bring home papers like that. That's just discouraging me. It's disgusting me.

Thus, it seems clear that the academic endeavors of the first semester and especially of the first few weeks of school represented a serious challenge to some new students' skills, self-confidence, and perseverance. Significant changes in schedules, priorities, and cognitive activity were required, and new skills and habits had to be learned quickly. In addition, the students had to deal with test anxiety and the fear of failure. It is not surprising, then, that students lacking a strong ego, a relatively firm commitment to being in school, and certain basic academic skills had a difficult time succeeding in school and convincing themselves to continue. They had problems organizing their time and their study materials, and they experienced disruptive levels of nervousness and anxiety when tested. For them school became a personal threat rather than a means to self-fulfillment and employability.

Facilitators - Although the academic adjustment of students in the study was

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rarely easy, the interviews indicate that certain approaches to studying and learning

proved more successful than others.

Generally successful students noted the importance of making school the top

priority in their lives. This meant that despite many other activities and

responsibilities these students gave school considerable attention. Some students

talked about having given up certain duties in order to do better in school. Others

discussed the value of forced concentration during classes and while doing

schoolwork. Almost all agreed that school needed to be taken seriously.

> There's some things that I'm definitely going to have to cut back
> on besides being a mother and a student and a wife. I'm a
> tupperware lady, a PTA board member, president of a ladies'
> auxiliary for the fire department, etc. I like ceramics, but I
> haven't done any in quite awhile. There's just so many things
> time consuming here. ... But school's more important than these
> things. I like them all. I will probably be active to some
> extent with them but not as much as I have been, because I feel
> like, if I want these things later I can do them after I get the
> schooling. I need to get the schooling first.
>
> My whole world revolves around school right now. If I'm in
> school, that's what I worry about first.
>
> Usually my schoolwork comes first. I try to do my housework
> after I get finished with my schoolwork.

Successful students also reported the virtue of a number of specific study

techniques. For example, many of the successful students cited the value of

establishing a committed but flexible study schedule. Having a schedule helped

students "stay on top" of their assignments, but given the ever-changing demands on

students lives both in and out of school, it was also important that the students be

able to accommodate unexpected events and responsibilities. Thus, the students felt

the most effective approach to studying was to study a lot within a flexible

framework. Although having some kind of a basic routine did help, adhering to a

strict schedule sometimes created more problems than it solved.

Along with this schedule flexibility, successful students displayed an ability

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to develop and adjust their studying on the basis of experience. They were
analytical about their academic performance and problems and developed effective
learning strategies on the basis of this ongoing analysis. They thought hard about
and figured out what techniques worked for them, and in the process they learned how
to compensate for their weaknesses, how to adapt to different teachers' styles, and
how to seek help before problems became serious.

> The first test I just went through and read and looked at my
> notes and took the test. Well, then I figured I had better get
> some better study habits, because I didn't do very well on the
> first test. So the second test I really studied. I underlined
> in the book and I knew everything. I mean I really studied on
> that test. And that helped a lot. I knew the information on the
> test.

> I've noticed, I mean I finally figured out, she puts a statement
> on the board, and it's usually a solution to something and then
> she goes back over here and puts down the subject of the problem.
> So I figured that much out, and I leave room in my notes to go
> back ... and get that. I've only had one test in there, and I
> was so scared that I'm not sure whether she does the same thing
> in her questioning on tests. I'm going to really watch for that
> tomorrow.

> After you take a couple of tests you know exactly what he's going
> to ask, and you kind of get that down. He goes mainly on the
> notes ... I read a chapter and go over my notes and then go back
> over my book.

> When I'm not doing to good, you know, I will get help. I always
> end up going to get someone that knows more about it than I do
> and get them to help me.

> I went up and asked at student services if anybody knew how I
> should study for Miss _____ tests. And the lady up there looked
> at my notes. She said "What have you been doing?" and we
> reviewed my study guide and what I had been doing.

In addition to analyzing and adjusting the way they were studying, successful
students employed good study habits to achieve their success. They took thorough
notes on both lectures and readings, they kept up with daily assignments, they edited
and studied their class notes and they read and reread their text assignments
carefully. When applied in combination these techniques helped the students maintain

control over their coursework. They also helped minimize panic and frustration before exams. Successful students observed:

> I always try to go over each thing ahead of time, right before
> class. I always like to read over it at least twice and then
> that gives you an idea of what is going to be on the exam. You
> can kind of get it in your mind. It's not good to cram it all in
> at once, because when you get in there you get all tensed, and it
> just all leaves you.

> It's easier to remember something if you write it down and read
> it out loud to yourself than it is if you just glance through it.

> I write a lot. Everything I think of when I study, I just keep
> writing, and I think that helps a lot.

> I take a lot on notes ... kind of my own language - symbols and
> everything. I always go back later that day and rewrite them,
> which helps me to remember them.

> Yeah, I'll go back over and read my notes at home. I'll read, go
> back over what we've studied that day. I go back home, that
> night when I put the kids to bed, then I'll go back and study my
> notes. ...There might be definitions I have left out or
> something, so I'll go back through the book and read through it
> and correspond it with my notes.

Thus, students who achieved success academically did so by developing determined but flexible study plans which suited their individual styles and which were centered around a commitment to notetaking, text reading, and daily class preparation. Such plans allowed students to keep up with their course assignments, to organize material in a memorable way, and to prepare for exams without the pressure of last minute cramming. They also helped students to accommodate a variety of non-school responsibilities and distractions and to deal with teachers' differing instructional styles.

## Classroom Issues

Impediments - Students in the study registered a number of noteworthy complaints regarding the process and content of instruction. Teachers' personal

characteristics and style, the way courses were organized and taught, and the texts

and other materials used to teach the courses were all issues of concern.

Of considerable importance to students in the study was whether their teachers

were helpful and sensitive regarding student problems. Most teachers seemed to be

well-liked by the students, but the few who were not were often described as some

combination of cold, impersonal, uncaring, inaccessible, prone to favorites, etc.

Given the general insecurity of many of the students as they entered school, it is

understandable that they were made uncomfortable by the absence of compassion and

personalized support in their relationships with certain teachers.

In discussing "problem teachers," students said thing like:

> In the class that I dropped, I don't know, it just seemed like
> you were, you were isolated from him (the teacher), you know.
> You didn't get personal attention l .e I have in my other
> classes.
>
> You can ask him (a teacher) a question and he'll say, "Oh, you
> ought to know that," and he won't even answer your questions. I
> just don't like him. ... Everybody dislikes him; even the good
> students dislike him. He doesn't care whether we learn it or
> not.
>   ... He intimidates me - makes me feel less than adequate - like
> I ought to know something I don't know, and it makes me feel bad
> so I just shut up.
>   ... I think he thinks everybody should have straight A's, and
> if they don't - tough cookies. And, he doesn't care how they get
> there or if they get there.
>
> I'm okay in all my classes but one. In there I won't say a
> thing. ... You ask a question and he humiliates you before it
> gets answered. I don't like that.
>   ... Anytime you ask him a question, he gives a smart aleck
> answer to you and then he will answer the question. ... We had
> about 30 people in our class, and we're down to 18 or 20. All of
> them have dropped out of his class. Other students have told me
> they think he's the rudest man they ever met in their life. You
> can't talk to him.
>
> I think I'm a little afraid of the guy myself (the teacher of a
> class the student was failing). I mean, you get certain people
> you just look at and you say, "Oh, I'm not going to talk to them
> or anything.
>   ... He doesn't know too much about me. I mean, I'm pretty well

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>   a stranger to him.  ... He's a hard, hard teacher and everything,
>   and you just try and get by and you still can't get by.  Shoot,
>   he isn't going to help, you know.  ... He gives the impression
>   that, you know, he wouldn't help you.  I mean, I just get a cold
>   feeling there, so I just stay away from him, and don't tell
>   anything.  I don't tell him that I'm afraid of him or anything,
>   you know.

And finally, a comment by a student who dropped out of school altogether, very

frustrat   by her experiences in one classroom.

>   Well, I'll tell you - a lot of us felt like we were getting the
>   raw end of the deal.  He paid more attention to some people than
>   he would to the others; you know, the ones that were kind of
>   smarter than the rest of us.  And, like, he played favorites or
>   something, and when you asked him a question he just kind of
>   shunned it off.

Thus, insensitive teachers were considered a serious impediment.  They drove

students away from behaviors associated with academic success, and, ultimately, they

drove some people out of courses and away from school.  In the classes of such

teachers, students with problems were often afraid to ask questions and seek help.

In addition they developed a pessimistic attitude toward the teacher and the course

and this led to frustration and a withholding of effort.

Another source of frustration for students centered around teachers who failed

to make the course material and its organization clear.  It was common for students

to voice complaints about teachers who did not explain some things sufficiently or

who did not indicate to students the importance of certain information and materials.

The structure and meaning of some instruction was left implicit and vague, confusing

those students who were unable to figure these things out on their own.  It made

daily studying difficult, and it left the students uncertain in their preparation for

exams.

Some students discussed the problem in terms of unclear schedules and

assignments.

>   When I go into a class I generally like to know what's expected

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of me. That way I know if I'll have to take some time from
something and put it on something else. When I can't plan like
that then comes the hypertension and the nervousness that. If I
had been expecting it, wouldn't have been so bad.

... If she (a teacher) would have just more-or-less explained
it to us all (the course schedule) ... then we could have relaxed
and gotten into it more than if she had just left us to feel our
way through.

... Everything is kind of vague. You know, it's your class,
but you don't really know what you re supposed to do. I don't
know what their theory is on that.

He's been on the first chapter, and we just went on to the second
today. But we had been on the first chapter for two weeks, just
reading in the book. And now we have an outline and an essay due
Monday which was never discussed. We've never discussed outlines
until today. ... He says, "do it as best you can but make sure
it's right. ... He's not explaining.

More commonly, students described the problem in terms of some teachers not

explaining the content of their class presentations well enough. Both the interviews

and classroom observations reveal that certain teachers seemed to work through

problems without telling students what they were doing. Others simply expected

students to learn without much student-teacher interaction. The assumption on the

part of these teachers seemed to be that the course materials were sufficient in and

of themselves. Many students disagreed.

I've got one instructor that doesn't like to explain anything to
you. You read your book, you learn what you learn, and if you
don't learn it, too bad.

He doesn't go over it. He doesn't show you how. He doesn't
explain it, nothing.

He would write, like, a problem on the board and just write how
the steps were, but he wouldn't tell you how he got those steps
and that was a big problem for me. ... I couldn't understand,
you know, how he was getting each step he was getting. He was
just writing the steps and not telling how.

He's just running through these problems as if it's nothing to
him, and I'm just sitting there wondering, how in the heck did he
come up with that? ... I've got no real problems except trying
to understand this instructor as he goes through a problem fast.

I think it's just difficult with the teachers; understanding what

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they were talking about; you know, not really taking time out to
explain what they were really wanting you to do.  There's a lot
of times in (a particular class) that the students would just,
absolutely, just ask, "What are you talking about?  We don't
understand," and he would get mad and say, "My God, it's as
simple as the nose on your face."

If I had a different teacher who explained to me more, and had a
little interest in whether I knew how to do it or not, I would
probably do better.

Thus, more than a few students were frustrated by the lack of clarity with which

instruction was sometimes presented.  Insufficient explanation led to personal

frustration and negative student-teacher relationships.  In the process it also

contributed to a negative attitude toward school.

A related and equally as serious complaint was voiced regarding the quantity and

pace of lectures encountered in school.  A substantial number of students felt there

was far too much lecturing and that much of it was too fast.  Students were very

clear on this.  There often seemed no time for questions, practice, or feedback. and,

given the speed of many lectures, it was often difficult to take complete notes and

think about the material as it was presented.  Both the interviews and the classroom

observations suggest that notetaking under pressure was a common classroom activity.

Lots of notes.  Sometimes he goes too fast and you really miss
out on it if you're not writing correctly.  And then I write too
fast and I abbreviate and I get home and I can t figure out what
I wrote down.  That's kind of rough.

You know, a lot of teachers go fast and they don't like to
repeat.  I mean, they go fast, and you have to write and try to
stay up.  That's my major problem (in that class).  He goes so
fast I can't hardly stay up with him, so I lose two or three
things while I'm writing one thing down.

Just copying, really, copying her notes, and you have to learn
them along with the chapter to read in the book.  That's kind of
hard keeping up.  I have to really pay attention.  Can't really
take the time to think about it because you have to hurry up and
write.

The whole time, you're taking notes.  I mean it's just note,
note, note.  One of the students yelled out a question in class,

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and she said that she would always ask if there were any
questions. And they told her that she never let up on the note-
taking long enough for them to ask a question.

The rapid pace and excessive quantity of lecturing was problematic in a number

of ways. Most importantly, many students missed information in class and did not get

a chance to clarify their knowledge by asking questions and trying things out in a

non-threatening, non-exam situation. This was particularly true in lecture-oriented

courses which were grounded in terminology new to the students. In these classes the

students often felt pressured to memorize without understanding. They complained

about a lack of explanation and example. One of the students who dropped out talked

about the problem this way:

It's a lot of pressure. One teacher talked so fast, I didn't -
she would say words I didn't even know what they - I didn't
comprehend what they meant.

Other students offered similar reports.

There's a lot of definitions. A lot of definitions and words.
And not enough examples. It seems like it's all memory work.
... It's tough.

Biology is hard for me because a lot of it, to me, there's a lot
of symbols and elements and things like that to memorize which
is, ... it's not as interesting.

I want to know something when I get out of here. I don't want to
just memorize and forget.

In addition and in association with their complaints regarding high speed

lecturing and insufficient explanation, a number of the students also criticized

teachers for inadequate review prior to tests. Some students felt they were not

given enough information about wh . might appear on tests, and they wanted more

opportunities to use and clarify their knowledge before exams. Given the students'

already substantial insecurity with regard to tests, this represented, for some , a

serious problem.

It's hard for me because he doesn't review the chapter. He'll

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point out the things he'll want you to know, but he doesn't go
over it with you. He doesn't review it and give examples of it.
And it's hard to understand.
    ... Like, he'll say, well, read this chapter and we ll read
it, you know, and nothing more is said about the chapter except
maybe a few things. ...This last exam, you know, the two
chapters that we were supposed to have the exam over were pretty
difficult to understand, and they weren't really ever explained
thoroughly.

I have trouble with, mostly my tests. ... If the teacher doesn't
explain it so I understand it, then I don't get it, but if she
does I'll catch on to it.

One of my teachers she, I don't know, she expects you to know
things and she doesn't teach what you should know sometimes. The
last test she told you to study so much of all this, you know,
she just kind of reviewed you a little bit and hardly any of it
was on the test. It was kind of, I don't know, puzzling or
something.

The second chapter she gave us three sheets that were "hand-outs"
and she said, "This is what you need to know on that chapter."
The next three chapters we covered in two days, so it's very
difficult to try to figure out what's up. Then she gave us a
guide sheet that covers the whole unit, and I just really feel
kind of out there somewhere with the test coming up.

Students were also critical of the way in which certain exams were conducted.

For example, a substantial number of students reported extreme frustration with

multiple choice tests. The multiple choice format often seemed to test not a

knowledge of the material but an ability to figure out the questions. It was

considered by many students a tricky and confusing method of testing.

I would rather have the fill-in the blank than the multiple
choice because it seems to me ... you have a better chance of
getting it right than you would have on multiple choice. You
read one and it sounds alright, maybe just one word in the whole
thing is wrong, and you go down to the next one and it sounds
right, too, and you read the next one and it sounds right. All
four of them sound right and then you have to, you have to study
a little bit more and read them over again.

She'll put a sentence down, and she'll have four definitions and
... all four of them seem almost the same. I've never had
anything like that before; not where, you know, they will all be
different, but it seems like most of them are basically the same
thing. ... That kind of hurt me.

Finally, it is important to note at many of the students in the study complained that their major textbooks were difficult to read and comprehend. An AEL readability analyses of these texts, corroborates this view, suggesting that most of the texts were written at a more advanced reading level than many of the students in the study possessed. Thus, difficult texts were another impediment the students encountered in their first semester classrooms.

To sum, then, regarding problems in the classroom, it is apparent that the instruction these new adult students encountered was not always to their advantage. Both the interviews and classroom observations suggest that teachers who were distant, who failed to explain their courses and materials adequately, and/or who lectured too fast and to the exclusion of student discussion caused students problems academically. In combination with multiple choice exams, difficult texts and large quantities of new terminology these factors represented significant challenges for the students as they attempted to maintain equilibrium and motivation during their first semester of school.

Facilitators - In contrast, the interviews and classroom observations make clear that some other kinds of instruction had a positive effect. Many students reported, for example, that teachers who were thoughtful and caring about their students' progress made a positive difference. This kind of teaching, the students said, fostered the confidence required for academic success.

From the interviews:

> In my biology class I made an F on my first test. I went up
> there, and I talked to my instructor, and he told me, he says,
> "You're having problems" I said, "Yeah." And he says, "Well, the
> best thing I can do for you is to tell you to go over to Student
> Services to get a tutor. Between your tutor and me, we'll get
> your grades up." So I took his advice ... and went up there and
> got a tutor. This is what I mean, you know. They try to help
> you as much as they can. At least with the instructors I got
> right now. They show that they care. (This student got a B in

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biology.)

> My best instructors go out of their way to help you. ... I was
> having problems with some chemistry equations, and my teacher was
> real helpful. He sat down here in the library after class one
> afternoon and, you know, went through every step, and after that
> I didn't have any problems with that.

> At the beginning I was discouraged in welding, because I just
> didn't think I was doing it right, you know. I couldn't weld,
> but, you know, he talked to me about that, and he was telling me
> all of them, when they first start, are the same way. ... He
> came up to me, and he talked to me and encouraged me to go on ...
> When the instructors talk to me, and they like what I do I guess
> that's what really encourages me, keeps it going for me.

Teachers who organized their courses thoroughly and clearly at the beginning of

the semester also achieved positive effect. They relieved students of much of the

anxiety associated with preparing for exams, and they made the material less

mysterious and more accessible. One way successful teachers accomplished this was to

follow rather closely both a textbook and a very specific syllabus.

For students in the study who commuted and generally were

not able to spend a great deal of time on campus, textbooks were a key resource.

They represented a portable and thoroughly organized reference for each course. When

things got confusing in class the text could be read and reread for clarification.

Even more importantly students reported the desirability of a clearly organized

and closely followed syllabus. Students in the study definitely needed a stable

reference point for the purpose of figuring things out on their own when other

resources were not available. A good syllabus helped in this regard.

> For one thing, the syllabus the teachers passed out gives me an
> opportunity to go ahead and know what's expected of me. If I
> feel like I'm pretty well up with the teacher or even if I get
> ahead, I think that helps out a lot. Sometimes that way when it
> comes time and I have to play catch up in another subject I still
> won't, you know, I won't lose it.

Students also found learning and good grades more attainable when teachers took

time to explain difficult concepts in a variety of ways and to develop understanding

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through practice and review. Much of the material being taught was unfamiliar and intimidating to the students. As a result, the students needed lots of examples to make it clear and meaningingful, and they needed controlled opportunities to practice with the material so as to make it their own. One student, for example, contrasted the explanatory and rote memorization approaches this way,

> There's one particular teacher, everything she discusses she
> shows examples, and, you know, she'll talk about it for a long
> time and that makes it stick in my mind you know, when she gives
> these examples. And then I have another one that just stands and
> reads off and you write it down and you're supposed to remember
> it, and she never gives any examples. She never explains or
> anything and it makes it real hard to understand it and remember
> it.[9]

Other students observed that they needed time to use and try out the information they were being given in class. Only with practice and review were they able to understand certain material. Small study groups, worksheets gone over in class, and thoughtful review before exams all presented such opportunities.

To sum, then, students were the most motivated and successful in those courses which were well organized and taught by compassionate teachers and which allowed for substantial pre-exam use and review of the material being taught. This is hardly a surprising finding, although it is an important one. The students in the study faced an unusual number of challenges and uncertainties during their first semester of school, and many of these originated in the classroom. Helpful, understanding teachers who followed a clear syllabus and employed lots of examples, non-threatening practice, and review prior to exams both defused some of the fears associated with academic uncertainty and made potentially complicated material more personally meaningful and accessible.

## Institutional Issues

Impediments - Students also experienced difficulties at a more institutional

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level. Most importantly, some students complained about their advisors and
placements, about the tutoring system and about the size of some of their classes.

While most students were at least relatively satisfied with their advisor, some
felt otherwise. Some students thought they had been incorrectly placed in courses
that were too difficult, and some felt they had been given inadequate explanation
when their advisors suggested particular course schedules or sequences. Some
students complained that they had not gotten to spend enough time, if any, with an
advisor before or during their first semester of school.

The most serious of the criticisms pertaining to advisors involved the placement
of students in courses or schedules they thought were too difficult for them. Rather
than representing a positive challenge, such an experience during the first semester
often led to frustration and a loss of self-confidence. In discussing his advisor
one student said:

> He's the type of fellow, I guess, he thinks everybody comes to
> college ought to at least know two-thirds of what is being taught
> already, but I don't. That's one of my problems you know. I
> mean, it just looks to me like they feel a man should know.
> something before he starts, but I didn't. I never saw any of
> this stuff in my life until I started.

A number of other students' experiences mirrored this comment as they found
themselves in courses "over their heads" and beyond their academic backgrounds. For
example:

> A friend of mine's over here, and it's not been an easy road for
> him. He just wasn't aware of how hard it was going to be. He
> didn't know all the math that was going to be involved and the
> English. He's got to drop out of his math course and back up.
> If he had had a little more counseling, ... I think this wouldn't
> have happened.

> We had shortcomings being out of school for so long, some of us.
> We were really behind in some of our math, and they took it for
> granted that we knew.

Given the limited academic backgrounds of many of these students, as well as the

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length of time they had been away from school, it seemed that a closer check of students' academic records or a more extensive use of placement testing would have helped. Even placement tests, however, were not a guaranteed solution. One student was given a math placement exam, and despite doing fairly well on it, ended up having to drop the course in which he was placed, because it was too difficult. Thus, even active testing and advising sometimes failed.

More generally, a number of students described the advising they received as inadequate. The advice they were given did not always seem helpful. In referring to conferences with advisors, students with complaints said things like:

> I don't think it was helpful. I just don't know about that one. They just don't want to answer you. They don't answer you sometimes.

> I felt like, well, this is my life, I should know why you want me to take this. Is this what I want? And again they say, "Well, I know what's best," or something like that. She's kind of like a mother-hen person, so I think she wants you to trust her rather than understand her. ... It was confusing. I find it more helpful to go to her ex-students and get the information.

> These people that are in the - making this transitional jump, you might say - I don't think they are well enough counseled. They don't know what they're getting into, and there needs to be a counseling program set up so they know what's down the road two years from now if they decide to switch fields or something.

In addition, it was not uncommon for students to have seen their advisors only briefly at registration, or to have not seen them at all. Some other students did not know who their advisor was.

> I saw her just on orientation day. Actually I didn't really get to carry on a conversation with her. I think when they got to me, you know, as far as the long line went, she was worn out and, you know, everyone else was worn out too. She directed me to the lady beside her, because there were so many, and they were already running late.

> I don't know what her name is. She's never there. I talked to one lady. She wasn't my advisor, but, let's see, I don't know what her name is either. I just talked to her once.

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In a related matter, a few students reported that they either had not been told about the availability of tutors for most of their courses or had experienced extreme difficulty in getting a tutor after requesting one. In more than one case it may have been the difference between passing and failing a course. One student, for example, did not know that tutors existed until after he had failed the first two tests in a course and was about to take the third. Another student had to wait almost a month after asking for help before she actually started meeting with a tutor.

> I talked to a counselor about it, and he said, that I could get a
> tutor. He asked me what grades and stuff I've had in there. I
> told him every test i'm lacking 10 points to passing the test.
> ... And he said, "You should have come a little earlier." I
> said, "Well, at the time I didn't know anything about getting a
> tutor." I mean, I didn't know  you go about it and
> everything. I said, "It was the  cond test before I realized
> that I really needed some help." I mean, ... I was hesitating to
> really go and ask them at first.
> ... Now, like I said, after I found out I can get one and
> everything, you know, it' a little late. ... I can get one now,
> but it sill wouldn't help me with the class, so, as it is, I'm
> just going to finish the class out and take it over.

> I ve talked to my advisor about getting a tutor and he says,
> "Well, if you think you need a tutor you let me know, and we'll
> get you a tutor." I said, "Well, I'm not doing too good 'n
> there." He said, "Well, I'll see if I can get you some help."
> But he hasn't said anything about it yet, and it's getting close
> to the term test.

> After I made 71 on the first test, I thought . would just study a
> little harder and it would get a little better. But I made 51 on
> the second test, so I decided it was time to get a tutor, and it
> took two and a half weeks to get one; and after I got her, they
> told me to meet ner the next week, so that was three and a half
> weeks. And by then, it was too late.

A number of students also expressed discomfort with the size of some of their classes. Widely required, introductory-level courses were often considered a problem, because they were too large. They were seen to suffer from depersonalized learning, because they tended toward straight lecture and inhibited discussion, and

they were thought to present too many distractions. Most students greatly preferred smaller classes.

> That class is the biggest I got. We have 61 students in that
> class. To me, that class is too large. There's just too many
> people in there. ...With that many people there's no way that
> everybody can hear everything because you're going to have people
> in there that don't care what's going on. They're still going to
> talk. They are going to goof off. And they are going to
> distract other people and it's hard, it's really hard.

> In that class, at times, it gets a little bit more rowdy, because
> there's 70 kids in that one class, ... and most of them are
> younger.

Thus, it is clear that new adult students encountered identifiable problems at the institutional as well as at the classroom level. Institutional level services did exist but in some cases their execution was poor and in other cases the students did not know how or when to take advantage of them. For students who were timid and experiencing academic difficulties services at the institutional level were not always clear or effective as they might have been.

Facilitators - Some students, though, did receive important assistance from advisors and various institutional services. They not only got support and academic help when experiencing problems, but occasionally they received guidance and training which were preventive in nature. Although not all students were satisfied with the guidance they received, many did report that advisors, tutors, and extra study-skill classes had helped them achieve success.

A number of students with special or unusual problems noted that school personnel in general gave them considerable encouragement during their early weeks in school. This helped them through a difficult and intimidating period of adjustment. For example, a man with a bad back as a result of two mining accidents said that this kind of support was central to his success in school.

> I would say, you know, a lot of it was in the encouragement. The
> people at the college encouraged me. That helps a lot. Like,

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this guy over here (an admissions counselor). I talked to him
three or four times, and it seems to me like every time I talk to
someone like that, with their ability to get you to want and like
school, it seems to me, like it helps a lot.

Another student, a woman experiencing severe hypertension and anxiety as a

result of her return to school, reported that she was receiving special counseling

that was very helpful.

I'm seeing a counselor, because I have a tendency to get hyper
whenever I take exams or am under pressure. And he's helping
some with this, and I was referred by him to Dr. ___ (a
psychologist). She seems to be very helpful. She's a concerned
person. I like her very much.

A number of other students reported that their advisors, specifically, had given

them good ideas and a great deal of attention and support. Certain advisors were

cheered for their flexibility, their suggestions and help in getting tutors and

study-skill classes, their help in engineering class and scheduling changes, and

their guidance with regard to course and career selection. In addition, a few

advisors were praised for going out of their way to monitor their students progress

in school. Advisors who looked after their students in hopes of helping them achieve

success did seem to inspire commitment and optimism.

Yes, my advisor is helpful. As a matter of fact I just finished
going by. I had missed an appointment, which was like an
informal talk to see if we had any troubles or anything that we
needed to talk to her about. ... I've gone to her about three
times and most of the stuff has been very well explained to me.
I haven't had to hunt her down or anything like that, either.
She's been available, and just the idea that she is there,
available, makes it a lot easier.

There's somebody there who has been willing to help me every time
I feel like, you know, I need it, or I'm going to have a problem.
And it seems like I can cut it out before it gets started. I
feel like if most students can do that, get it cut or stopped
before it gets started, that helps.

Even more specifically, certain students praised their advisors for having

recommended a course schedule that allowed them to develop a sure footing. Some

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students, for example, were guided toward courses which gave them a chance to refresh

their knowledge and study skills through review.  In addition, some students entered

school with a part-time rather than a full-time course load, and this made their

initial adjustment a good deal less severe.  All in all, such techniques served to

increase these students' chances for success.  They contributed to good academic

performance and as such lead to the development of self-confidence.

> My advisor said it would be best that I go back and review this
> before I take college algebra, ... which was probably a good
> idea, because I had forgotten a lot of my math.

Similarly, special study-skill instruction and tutoring services, which were

often recommended by students' advisors, served to help students deal with their

academic problems.  Note-taking courses, for example, helped students become more

efficient and better organized, both in class and in their studying.

> I have a class from Mrs. ____ upstairs in the library, and she's
> been showing us different things, like we're getting back into
> notes again, and she goes over it, you know, back on the
> shortcuts and stuff like that.  ... I'm starting to pick up on
> that class.  I'm starting to pick up from it and apply it to,
> like, my sociology class.  ... I would say it's a very helpful
> class.  ... There's note sessions where you take notes and you go
> over them.  She goes over your notes with you to see what you
> took that really didn't have anything to do with what you were,
> you know taking notes of.  And she shows you little shortcuts and
> everything like that.  And so i think that class helps me a lot.

And, tutoring helped students deal with academic material that had become

confusing, threatening, and frustrating.

> I used a tutor, and it did seem to help.  At Special Services she
> ran a lab summary.  She told us about math, and she gave us a
> workbook that we returned after we used it.  I passed my test the
> second time okay.

> A tutor works with me on my spelling, because I've always had a
> problem with that and my speed reading.  I can comprehend, but in
> a lot of reading situations I've just never been able to read
> fast and comprehend, so she works with me personally on that and
> the spelling.  She supplies all kinds of materials.  Just about
> anything I can think would help, she can come up with something
> that might help.  And Mrs. ____ supplied us with a tutor for her

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class. So, if I have a problem or something I don't understand,
if I need some extra help, I can go see her.

Thus, it is apparent that advisors and special services do make a difference.
Many adult students seem to need remedial coursework and numerous success experiences
during their first semester in order to bolster their confidence and convince them
that school can be a fun and rewarding venture. Thoughtful and supportive advisors
can help students plan for success, and a network of additional academic and
psychological services can provide students with a variety of options when problems
develop. It is clear that the existence of such services benefitted greatly a number
of potentially borderline students in the study.


### Recommendations

It is clear that students in the study had to deal effectively with a broad
range of challenges and problems if they were to succeed in their first semester in
community college. Not only did the students have to accommodate the academic
demands of their courses, but they had to struggle with economic and domestic issues
raised by their return to school. Achieving success in school required significant
adjustment and adaptation in many areas of the students' lives.

There is, of course, no way that community colleges can address all of the
problems detailed in this report. Nevertheless, the students themselves, in their
discussions of what impeded and facilitated their success pointed to practical ways
in which their first semester could have been improved. Some problems it seems could
have been eliminated altogether. Others might have been limited by helping the
students anticipate them. Thus, it appears that community colleges like those in the
study can be made more effective in the way they serve returning adult students.

Upon completion of the research for this phase of the AEL project, 20 community
college administrators and faculty members representing nine community colleges in

the AEL region were invited to participate, along with seven members of the AEL

staff, in the development of reform interventions based on the research findings.  A

rather unique component of the AEL project is that it includes funding for

interventions to be planned and implemented at the end of each phase.  At the end of

a year those interventions are evaluated and, ultimately, they are adopted or

rejected by the AEL region schools involved.  In this way, the research is linked

directly to service and practice.

The recommendations which came out of the phase- two intervention planning

meeting represent three basic categories.  As with the research, they reflect the

importance of seeing adult students' problems as complex and interrelated and as

requiring attention in both academic and non-academic spheres.  The three categories

of intervention are:

> * Interventions directed at helping adult students with their
>   problems outside of school,
>
> * Interventions aimed at improving the classroom experience, and
>
> * Interventions for the improvement of academic services at the
>   institutional level.

Although it is difficult for community colleges to reach into the lives of their

students, a number of interventions were recommended for the purpose of helping adult

students with their problems outside of school.  These included:  college-sponsored

child-care centers staffed by students in appropriate programs; adult student support

groups in which students could discuss their problems with peers and with already

successful adult students; in-service training for advisors, counselors, and teachers

to make them more sensitive to adult students' problems outside of school; and

increased dissemination of information about financial aid options and the cost of

returning to school and about school transportation systems and car pooling.  There

was a sense that community colleges must concern themselves, as best they can , with

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the students' lives outside of school.

Regarding the classroom instruction of adult students, both the interviews and classroom observations indicate that certain kinds of teachers are superior to others. Teachers who organized their courses around a detailed syllabus, who offered thorough explanation and review, who included dialogue and student questioning in class, and who were kind and thoughtful regarding students' problems were, understandably, seen by the students as the most motivating and effective teachers. In contrast, teachers who lectured almost exclusively and who did not create an environment conducive to dialogue and explanation were viewed as serious deterrents to academic success. As a result, it seems community college educators must attempt to ensure that all teachers are more like the former group than like the latter. In light of this the following interventions were recommended: in-service skill-training programs to help teachers become aware of and improve their methods of instruction; systematic and supportive evaluations of teachers; the use of good teachers as mentors, both for new teachers and for teachers identified as having problems: a thorough orientation of new f ulty regarding the special needs of adult students; and formal opportunities for teachers to discuss, both among themselves and with administ ators, the problems and practices of teaching adult students. The emphasis was on improving the knowledge and skills of teachers and on providing a network of resources and support for teachers so they might become more effective in their instruction of and interaction with adult students.

At the institutional level, the research identified a variety of impediments requiring attention. These primarily concerned advising and tutoring, although they also incl'ded issues such as the readability of texts.

Some students complained they had received insufficient direction. Others felt they had been guided somewhat autocratically toward courses which were inappropriate

or  oo difficult.  In addition, there were students who criticized the special help

or tutoring they received for being inadequate and/or too late.

In contrast, there were students who felt their advisors had provided sound and

supportive counsel.  There also were students pleased with the tutoring or study-

skills help they had received.  These students, by and large, felt their positive

experiences at the institutional level had significantly increased their chances for

success.  As a result, it seems important that community colleges provide complete

and systematic support services.  Without this kind of support adult students may be

more likely to fail; with it they seem more likely to succeed.

In line with this reasoning the following institutional level recommendations

were made:  more thorough counseling at the time of enrollment regarding the

f rmulation or appropriate goals, the presentation of more information about majors

and careers in introductory and developmental courses, more mandatory advising

sessions during the first few months of school, closer assessment of incoming adult

students' skill levels, development of a computerized progress-monitoring system

which would identify students having academic difficulties before their problems

became too serious, improved dissemination of information about tutorial and study

skills services, and thorough reading level analyses of major texts and materials.

These changes, it was felt, would increase the likelihood that all adult students

would  ceive the close guidance and support they so  ten seemed to need during

their first semester.


## Conclusion

It is apparent that m ny students in the study experienced confusion, insecurity

and f ustration as they began community college.  They not only had to figure out how

to succeed academically, which was a major challenge, but they had to juggle domestic

and financial responsibilities in such a way is to limit the conflicts their return

to school may have raised at home. Thus, it seems vital that community college

educators provide students like those in the study with as broad based and systematic

a network of support as possible. Teachers must be guided toward practices which

will make their courses motivating and accessible for these students, the student

must be advised regarding the wide range of problems they are likely to encounter,

and programs and policies must be implemented which will help the students develop a

sense of purpose and success at the outset.

If community colleges can provide adult students with this kind of environment

and support during their first semester they can accomplish a great deal. Not only

will the students chances for academic success be improved, but their general

capacity to manipulate and exercise control over their lives will be increased as

well. As the following quote by a 35 year old single mother indicates, this is the

foundation of confidence and long-term, self-initiated growth.

> I enjoy being in school, really. I felt I was just standing
> still. My brain was not working. I enjoy being back and being
> able to learn and find out what's going on and everything. ... I
> feel better about myself. You know I had gotten kind of where I
> thought, you know, who are you or whatever, but now I feel like,
> you know, I am somebody and I'm trying to accomplish things. It
> akes you feel better about yourself. ... I mean, it's made me
> feel like I'm an intelligent person, and that I can set goals and
> accomplish them, and that I can do things that I've never done
> before.

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## ENDNOTES

1. My role in the project was as a consultant engaged to analyze Phase II interviews and to aid in the development of recommendations and interventions based on the research.

2. This discussion focuses on the interview findings. For separate reports concerning the classroom observations and daily logs and for information regarding any other aspects of the project, readers should contact the Appalachia Education Laboratory, Box 1348, Charleston, West Virginia 25325.

3. Not surprisingly, the daily logs support this view. Students working more than 20 hours a week seemed to study fewer hours than those working fewer than 20 hours a week.

4. The daily logs show that women with children studied much more often during the late evening hours (9-1) than did other students.

5. The classroom observations support this view of two types of teaching. One tends to be learner-centered and the other teacher-centered. The learner-centered approach was much more popular with the students. It also seemed more effective.

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