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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the characteristics of nontraditional student populations, reviews programs of interest, identifies problems and concerns of these students, and provides a model for orientation sessions targeting nontraditional populations. Following a brief introduction, section II discusses the characteristics, retention, and academic performance of nontraditional students, noting that in general they are responsible for themselves and others, view education as one of several competing priorities, see their difference in age and family responsibilities as barriers to attending college, and often perform better academically than traditional students. Section III discusses programs of interest to nontraditional students, including professional retraining, mid-career programs for executives, weekend colleges, and week-long programs for older adults. Section IV addresses the problems and concerns nontraditional students have at college, discussing the attitudes of faculty and other students, admissions procedures which request information and recommendations from high schools, time-consuming registration procedures, child care, finances, and time pressures. Section V presents a model orientation session to focus on the needs of adult learners, reviewing planning procedures, setting an agenda for the session, and evaluating the orientation. Finally, section VI provides concluding remarks highlighting the importance of recognizing and responding to the needs of nontraditional students. (Contains 24 references.)
(BCY)

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PROGRAMS, ISSUES, AND CONCERNS REGARDING NONTRADITIONAL STUDENTS
WITH A FOCUS ON A MODEL ORIENTATION SESSION

BY

TERRY HAZZARD

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FOR

DR. MARY PANKOWSKI

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**Programs, Issues, and Concerns Regarding Nontraditional Students
with a Focus on a Model Orientation Session**

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I. INTRODUCTION

American colleges and universities have witnessed the growth of several nontraditional subcultures within undergraduate education. Kasworm (1980) asserts that one of the most recent subcultures to gain collegiate awareness has been nontraditional students.

As Dean of Students at Bishop State Community College in Mobile, Alabama, where nearly 45% of the student population consists of nontraditional students, I have developed a special interest in the academic survival and support of this unique group of students. Thus, this project will (1) discuss the characteristics of nontraditional students; (2) address special programs of interest; (3) identify their problems and concerns; and (4) provide a model for orientation sessions specifically for this population of students.

II. A. CHARACTERISTICS

Garland (1985) suggests that traditional students have been defined as "white, middle class, 18-24 year old, and adequately prepared for college-level academic work" (p.29). Nontraditional students do not fall into this category. At most higher educational institutions, these students are married, have children, and are over the age of 24. White (1980) suggests that these students are:

- "1. financially independent of parents;
2. largely responsible for him or herself, and frequently directly responsible for the well being of others;

3. perceived by others as generally fulfilling several roles typical of mature adults in our society; and
4. a perceiver of formal educational activity as only one of several competing priorities, and often as an incidental activity, through one of increasing importance" (p.66).

11. B. RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION

The Carnegie Commission on Higher Education suggests that the future of many colleges and universities may rest on their ability to recognize and initiate new educational opportunities for nontraditional students. According to Kegel (1977), "In a time of ever tightening budgets, combined with the often frantic scramble of admissions people to recruit the dwindling number of high school graduates, the adult student has suddenly acquired a new statue. Admission officers all over the country are performing mental gymnastics in their efforts to find new, and more imaginative ways to attract adult students to their campuses" (p. 10).

According to Bauer (1981), nontraditional students weigh a number of factors when deciding to attend college, such as commitments to spouses, children, and employment. He further points out that self-confidence and support from family, relatives and friends are essential to their academic success.

Nontraditional students have many barriers to attending college: being older than traditional students promote feelings of rejection by classmates and professors; class location and schedules; entrance examinations; high tuition; poor prior academic records;

balancing jobs, school, and family responsibilities; and the red tape surrounding enrollment procedures all contribute to the decision-making process of nontraditional students.

Belle, et. al., (1974) point out that to alleviate these and other concerns, colleges and universities have developed special services units that explain student services to adults. There are a number of recruitment and retention activities for nontraditional students, such as the "wagon wheel" concept, where organizations distribute brochures and other literature inviting adults students to enroll. Students currently enrolled may also serve as speakers at clubs and associations promoting instructional programs. According to the authors, some institutions have developed two-year associate degree programs similar to those offered by community colleges whereby classes are scheduled at night and on weekends. Special adult groups should also be initiated which could provide visibility for adults.

II. C. ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

Once the decision is made to (re)enter college, nontraditional students generally perform better than their traditional counterparts, perhaps because adults enter the classroom for instruction with their own values, needs, beliefs, attitudes, self-concepts, and past experiences. Kasworm (1980) suggests that unmet needs are the prime source of motivation. Verduin (1977) asserts that there are five levels of need which may assist adults in understanding their reasons and motivation for returning to school.

The five identified levels are:

1. **Basic** - needs which reflect physiological and survival goals. (shelter, clothing, and food)
2. **Safety** - needs of security, orderliness, protection. (adequate salary, insurance policies, personal protection)
3. **Belongingness** - needs for interpersonal relationships, feeling accepted, and appreciated. (family ties, friendships, group memberships)
4. **Ego-Status** - need for gaining status, ambition and desire to excel. (various professional and social awards)
5. **Self-Actualization** - needs for personal growth, greater creativity, and personal achievement. (seeking autonomy, taking risks, seeking freedom to act)

These needs as well as human values and attitudes are important determiners of human behavior. Lack of progress in achieving goals is tied closely to the low self-concept and lack of self-confidence that some nontraditional students possess.

Programs that are needed for nontraditional students vary from state to state. Cross (1977) contends that student consumers are demanding. Taxpayers are encouraging postsecondary education for all citizens. Nontraditional students are requesting curricula that are relevant to their particular needs in a setting of physical flexibility that guarantees access. The author further asserts that it is the responsibility of each educational institution to respond to this demand.

III. PROGRAMS

A variety of programs have been found to be of interest to adult students. The following is a discussion of some of the different

kinds of programs that have been implemented.

III. A. PROFESSIONAL RETRAINING

Professional retraining is being ensured in some states by passing laws that require professionals such as lawyers, dentists, physicians, veterinarians, pharmacists, etc., to take a certain number of continuing education courses a year. Other states are rescinding the same type of laws--many professionals want to take courses, but they believe it should be on a volunteer basis and not regulated by the state.

One type of credit which is given in continuing education is the C.E.U. or Continuing Education Unit. It is a certificate of attendance of ten hours of non-credit education. The C.E.U. is just a record of attendance and is meaningless as a credit. However, it is used many times by professionals to show they are attending classes and keeping up with the latest advances in their fields. (Hulbert, 1979, p.6)

III. B. MID-CAREER PROGRAMS FOR EXECUTIVES

Mid-career programs for executives are another type of retraining that has been received with great interest. These programs allow top level managerial personnel to stay abreast of technological changes.

While the executive programs at some business schools are desperate for student, the best programs at institutions such as Harvard, Columbia, and Stanford are oversubscribed. The number of

candidates requesting enrollment at Carnegie-Mellon is so large that this institution does not bother to print brochures to promote its executive education program.

According to Maeroff (1979), Harvard's Advanced Management Program is thirteen weeks long, and sessions run consecutively year round. The drawing point is that people in management have a chance to compare themselves with their peers in other high level positions. The best investment by the company is the time a person spends away from the job and not the cost of the program. The students in Harvard's program are about forty-five years old and they have salaries estimated at \$75,000.

While there, these executives are involved in intense study and pose an enormous challenge to their professors. It is easy to impress a young M.B.A. student, but if they are teaching finance to the financial vice president of a \$500 million dollar company, they will learn quickly when information conflicts.

III. C. EDUCATION IN INDUSTRY

Education in industry is big business. Of the 32 million employees studies, at least one out of eight take part in some formal off-the-job education or training under company sponsorship. (Lusterman 1978). The corporate education system has three characteristics that set it apart from traditional ones:

1. High motivation of all participants;
2. Work place is the setting for both learning and doing; and
3. Its role as an instrument for achieving other goals-- business, profit, growth, vitality--and its accountability

to a private and rather narrow constituency. (p.89)

Independent learning has become an essential concept in the face of the declining enrollment of traditional 18-22 year old students. In independent learning, a contract is drawn up explaining what is expected. According to Worby (1979), four important guidelines shape a learning contract:

1. The student's general educational purposes;
2. The specific purposes of the particular contract being written;
3. The actual learning activities to be undertaken; and
4. The criteria by which the work will be evaluated.

As the author points out, when students learn how to learn, as opposed to what to learn, they become "inner directed" as opposed to "outer directed." They come to associate learning with something they are in charge of. The student becomes more self-reliant, disciplined, and independent.

III. D. WEEKEND COLLEGE

Weekend College is an accommodation for the new trend in adult education. This accommodation is handled in a variety of ways, ranging from a few additional courses to complete baccalaureate programs designed specifically for adults.

According to Stretch and Cervaro (1979), the format at Mundelin, a four-year liberal arts college in Chicago, is designed around the characteristics of adults who are employed full time outside the

home. It is based on the assumption that many potential higher education students are simply too tired to consider sustained attendance in an evening program, or they have jobs which require substantial and unpredictable overtime or travel.

For some, child care arrangements are made more easily on weekends when other adult family members are not working. The typical class meets three and a half hours, Friday night through Sunday, five times in a twelve week term. Courses are constructed on the premise that primary focus should be on what students learn rather than on what instructors teach. The telephone and mail provide students alternative ways of interacting with instructors. Advance assignments, take-home examinations, and take-home projects are ways that motivated adults can use to compact time. (pp. 8-10)

III. E. ELDERHOSTEL

Elderhostel is a program in which older persons spend a week or more taking college courses on campuses nationwide. During each week-long session at college, 40 to 50 students attend liberal arts courses, sleep in college dormitories, and eat in the dining halls.

Courses taught must be instructed by regular faculty members at a level equal to the regular academic program. As a guideline, none of the courses taught can provide instructions regarding aging.

The most pervasive need for persons who are retired is to see themselves as significant. Elderhostel was founded at the University of New Hampshire by Martin T. Knowlton and David Bianco.

It developed as a result of Knowlton's matching of two problems: growing old in an youth-oriented society, and inefficient use of billions of dollars in college investments during the summer. Over the years, the program has grown extensively, addressing the participants in the way they wish to be addressed, as vital and alive people. (p. 11)

VI. PROBLEMS AND CONCERNS OF NONTRADITIONAL STUDENTS

Nontraditional students face a significant number of problems which need to be addressed by educational institutions throughout the country. Kimmel and Murphy (1976) contend that the success and retention of adults in colleges and universities are functions of faculty-student interaction.

IV. A. ATTITUDES TOWARD NONTRADITIONAL STUDENTS

According to the authors, faculty often perceive adults as inferior to traditional students, yet many studies indicate that nontraditional students earn higher grade point averages than traditional students.

Bauer (1981) suggests that adult students even evoke anger in some faculty members because instructors believe these students use education to enhance careers rather than to pursue learning for the sake of learning. The author points out that at times faculty members are threatened by adults who challenge their lectures and find them to be irrelevant. Johnson (1979) asserts that in an effort to reduce concerns relative to faculty members, the Division

of Student Services may want to sponsor a task force or workshop to focuses on adult student concerns. These workshops should include faculty members, administrators, and non-traditional students as speakers and group leaders.

IV. B. ADMISSIONS

Bauer (1981) asserts that admissions procedures are often confusing. The request for high school transcripts and letters from high school counselor seem irrelevant. If the high school exits, teachers and counselors are unfamiliar with the adult student. As a result, they are unable to provide recommendations.

IV. C. COUNSELING

Trussler (1983) contends that nontraditional students should have counselors who understand the problems of adult students. Unlike traditional students, they do not have access to high school counselors and require advice even before applying.

IV. D. PARKING

Trussler (1983) points out that parking is an ongoing problem for nontraditional students on most college campuses. According to the author, this issue may be more severe for adults who must balance employment and family responsibilities, while trying to get to and from class.

IV. E. REGISTRATION

Hughes (1983) points out that one of the greatest needs-assessment of adults was performed at New York State University in 1979. The results of this assessment indicated that the registration process was one activity that was rated as an important issue for adult students. Trussler (1983) contends that following a survey at the University of Alberta, results indicated that adults found registration to be time-consuming and frustrating.

IV. F. STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES (LIBRARY, OFFICES, BOOKSTORE)

According to Trussler (1983), a significant number of adult students combine employment and study at various times throughout the day. On many college campuses, the operating hours for these services are inadequate, which makes it difficult to secure books, counseling and advisement, and other services.

IV. G. CHILD CARE

Gilley and Hawkes (1989) assert that adults want flexible child care facilities. Trussler (1983) points out that the unavailability of these facilities have often caused concerns for adults. Child care may also contribute to the need for additional financial assistance.

IV. H. FINANCES

Money is probably the most serious concern for many adult

students, students who may be ineligible for scholarships because of their part-time status. According to Trussler (1983), single adults with children are those who often have the most financial need.

IV. I. TIME PRESSURES

Bauer (1981) points out that the time requirements for a degree or to return to college are demanding. Many adult students have full-time jobs and family responsibilities. Trussler (1983) asserts that part-time students find time pressures to be an ongoing problem. Other problems and concerns may include academic counseling, evening courses, transfer of credit, study space, disruption of family life, and additional academic concerns.

V. ORIENTATION

Many of the problems and concerns regarding nontraditional students may be specifically addressed and possibly resolved as a result of the implementation of an Orientation session primarily designed to focus on the needs of adult learners. The success of such a student services function depends on the support and participation of the faculty, staff, and administration.

According to Rawlins (1979), orientation programs for nontraditional students should be designed to meet their individual needs and concerns. These programs should inform students of programs and activities which contribute to the total campus environment. In that students must consult with their families

prior to deciding to enroll, these programs should be offered at convenient times in order meet their busy schedules.

V.A. PLANNING PROCEDURES

White (1980) reports that nontraditional students often benefit from a structured orientation program from 2 to 3 hours. These sessions should be organized and intensive, and must include:

- " 1. Procedures - the "nitty-gritty" routine but necessary information about matters such as admissions, registration, advising, dropping and adding courses, credit by examination and paying fees.
2. Support services and how to take advantage of them - counseling, career planning and placement, tutoring and other kinds of learning assistance, reading and study skills improvement programs and financial aid.
3. Academic advising and course selection - here it is highly desirable to involve members of the teaching faculty, no matter what the degree and kind of involvement of student affairs staff.
4. Programs and activities offered on campus either intended specifically for nontraditional student or of interest to them." (p. 77)

Recognizing the special needs of nontraditional students, the following portion of this project will focus in detail on the recommended procedures to follow in the implementation of a two to three hour orientation session for students participating in University Continuing Education for the 1993 Fall semester.

It is important to establish a meeting date and time one to two months prior to the orientation session so that proper planning can take place. Additionally, a room should be reserved where the session will be held. As soon as possible after the date has been

determined, it would be helpful to obtain a computer list of the names and addresses of students who are over the age of 25 and who have been admitted to the College. This list should also indicate their majors and academic status. Additionally, it will indicate the number of students who are eligible to participate. These students should be contacted and informed of the orientation session. It would be wise to include a follow-up sheet in their mailouts where they can indicate if they plan to attend. This will also provide some indication of how to plan with regards to materials and room accommodations. Burton (1982) points out that this mailout should include first time freshmen, transfer, part-time, and readmitted students.

Once the date and time of the meeting have been determined, Burton asserts that arrangements should be made to have computer terminals available to register students on orientation day. Additionally, the Business Office personnel should be contacted regarding accepting fee payments. Campus security and general information should be notified so that they will be able to provide directions in case students are unable to locate the facility where the session is scheduled to take place. Representative from other Student Services components should be informed of the date and time of the session so that can be prepared to make presentations.

In preparing for academic advising and course selection, faculty members should be informed of the orientation session. From the list generated from the computer center, the Orientation Coordinator should review the proposed majors and notify the

faculty members from each major represented and request their assistance during the advisement process. For students who are undecided about majors, special advisors should be notified.

Weeks prior to orientation, confirmation letters should be mailed to students. These letters should include class schedules, campus maps, and suggested areas of parking.

Turnbull (1989) reports that Peer Support Counselors should be identified and asked to participate. These students should be successful adult students who have volunteered to encourage and advise the incoming adults.

Burton (1982) recommends that advisement folders be prepared for each student so that advisors would be able to effectively assist students. These folders should consist of trial schedule forms, transcripts, and standardized test scores, if any. Additional folders should be prepared that include academic programs, campus organizations, the Student Handbook, College Catalog and an agenda for the session.

Two days before the orientation, a campus tour should be arranged. Food services should be notified. On the day before orientation, place signs strategically around the facility providing directions to the room where the sessions will take place.

V. B. AGENDA

Fifteen minutes prior to the orientation should be allocated to check-in and refreshments. At the scheduled hour, which should be

after 5:00p.m., orientation personnel should be introduced, and the goals and objectives of the orientation session discussed. Representatives from the top-level administration should be encouraged to attend to provide greetings. An adult student should also bring greetings on behalf of the currently enrolled students.

After the introductions, a brief get acquainted activity should be provided which would allow students an opportunity to get to know one another. Following this activity, representatives from such Student Support Services as financial aid, career planning and placement, tutoring, health services, counseling, special programs, etc., should be asked to provide five to ten minute presentations relative to their areas of concentration. Turnbull (1982) points out that during the presentations, reference should be made to personalized referral services where students can be connected with special campus services through a telephone hot line; brown bag seminars where adults can discuss topics such as test-taking, reading or study skills, off-campus housing, emergency locator service, and other such nontraditional student concerns. Burton (1982) suggests that following the presentations, a break should be given to allow time for questions or an opportunity for students and faculty to get acquainted. After the break, it may be advantageous to divide students into small groups depending upon their student status. Different types of questions and needs will often vary depending on group commonalities. However, typical topics for discussion may include registration procedures, interpretation of the schedule, understanding the catalog, credit

hours, developmental courses, changing majors, and dropping and/or adding courses.

This activity may be followed by a campus tour which could be coordinated by adult students who have been trained to serve as tour guides. This would also allow time for faculty members and the registration personnel to prepare for the official registration process.

After the tour, students should return to the orientation area where they should be advised in small groups. Faculty members should be present to assist them. Following the completion of the advisement process, each student will be given a trial schedule and directed to the registration office or to the location where they will receive their official class schedule. A location where fees should be payed and identification cards distributed should also be identified. Once the entire registration process has been completed, students should be reminded to read the **Student Handbook** and the **College Catalog**, which contain the policies and procedures of the College.

V. C. ORIENTATION EVALUATION

After fees have been paid, an evaluation survey of the orientation participants should be conducted to assessed the effectiveness of the orientation session. As Turnbull (1982) points out, it should be the objective of the assessment to identify problems, priorities, and suggestions for addressing issues in an effort to meet the needs of adult students.

The format of the survey could vary depending on individual preferences. Although it should not be required, it would be helpful to request the person's name and major. The survey should include a grading scale with categories such as excellent, good, average, and needs improvement. Additional areas should also be rated, such as information received in advance; registration procedures and payment of fees; financial aid services; staff attitudes; college survival tips; or the helpfulness of the advisor. Open ended questions may include: factors enjoyed best about orientation; factor enjoyed least about orientation; an overall rating of the orientation session; and an opportunity for comments.

VI. CONCLUSION

As American higher education continues to focus on the issues regarding multiculturalism and student diversity, colleges and universities must recognize the needs and demands of nontraditional students. Within this project, I have briefly identified this population and addressed the reasons for their levels of motivation which describes their academic performance. I have addressed several programs of interest and identified problems and concerns. Additionally, a model for a two to three hour orientation session has been described in which many of these issues can be addressed through efforts of research, public service, programs of instruction, and in other institutional settings. Such sessions

can provide a setting in which these students can feel free to ask questions and receive the direction needed to prevent isolation and, as a result, feel that they are a part of the total college community.

As revealed from the literature, nontraditional students, as compared to their counterparts, are older, highly motivated and serious about learning. American higher education must make available to this population the academic assistance and support services needed for them to achieve their educational objective.

From my personal experiences and as previously indicated, nontraditional students constitute a significant portion of the total student population enrolled in colleges and universities. As part-time students, they enroll with numerous barriers and personal concerns that must be addressed if the primary purpose of higher education is expected to prevail. As Ervin (1977) points out, the enrollment of part-time students in higher education will continue to increase and will have a significant impact on the delivery of educational programs and services. As professionals and practitioners in higher education, we must become concerned and reacclimated to our profession by providing new and innovative types of services in an effort to meet the growing needs of this student population.

The needs of nontraditional students must not be ignored. They are capable of benefiting from access to higher education. Access must mean more than being admitted to a college or university, it must address one's ability to meet reasonable academic standards

and the willingness to apply oneself to complete the work required.

The American Council of Education (1974) summarized it well:

"the physical and sensory equipment of people of all ages is ample for most kinds of learning if used efficiently... there is nothing about aging itself which prevents or seriously hampers learning. Continuing education has become an important enterprise for millions of adults, and the effectiveness of such education is a matter of utmost social and national importance."
(p.35)

Few students can afford the luxury of "education for education's sake." Nontraditional students increasingly insist on seeing the value of their investment in time and financial resources. I believe the program I have outlined provides personal growth, the development of marketable skills, and upward mobility which non-traditional students expect.

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