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ABSTRACT

This study explored how adult students define success in college and their perceptions of factors that either support or hinder achievement of this success. Thirteen returning adult students at two institutions were interviewed using a grounded theory approach. Data were analyzed inductively and iteratively to identify persistent themes. Students made clear and mutually exclusive distinctions between definitions of success in college and success in learning on the basis of two dimensions--the ownership of knowledge and the perceived potentiality or actuality of its use. Six themes emerged about factors identified as either contributing or hindering adults' success in college and learning: (1) experience, (2) maturity, (3) motivation, (4) self-monitoring ability, (5) reinforcement systems; and (6) classroom experiences. The study's findings support the need for new conceptualization of outcomes and the factors associated with these for increasingly diverse student bodies. The interview guide is appended. (Contains 33 references.) (Author/DB)

Adult Undergraduate Students: How Do They Define Success?

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Abstract

Research has demonstrated that adult undergraduate students do as well or better in college as traditional aged students although adults' involvement on campus is meager. In addition, studies suggest that college outcomes for adults are not limited to our conventional definitions of them. These two lines of inquiry suggest a gap in our conceptions of college outcomes for adults and the processes they employ to achieve these results. This exploratory study addresses this gap in our understanding by investigating (a) how adults define success in college, and (b) adults' perceptions of factors that either support or hinder achievement of success as students define it. Using a grounded theory approach, the research team interviewed thirteen returning adult students at two different types of institutions. Data were analyzed inductively and iteratively to identify persistent themes that, in turn, allowed conclusions to evolve. Students made clear and mutually exclusive distinctions between success in college and success in learning on the basis of two dimensions -- the ownership of knowledge and the perceived potentiality of actuality of its use. Seven themes emerged about factors that contributed or hindered adults' success in college and in learning -- experience, maturity, motivation, self-monitoring ability, reinforcement systems, and classroom experiences. The study's findings, with results of other recent studies, support the need for new conceptualizations of outcomes and the factors associated with these for the increasingly diverse undergraduate student body. Suggestions are made about ways to reconceptualize college outcomes for adults and a number of research and policy questions are raised for further inquiry.

Adult Undergraduate Students: How Do They Define Success

Introduction

Despite the fact that adult undergraduates represent 40-45% of the students in college (Aslanian, 1990; NCES, 1996), contemporary views of college outcomes for adults remain largely informed by models and research associated with traditional age students, even though there is evidence that these perspectives are not appropriate for adult learners (Kasworm & Pike, 1994). Many of these models stress the importance of the students' involvement in the college environment. For example, according to involvement theory, the greater the level of a student's participation and involvement in college, the greater the learning and personal development that result (Astin, 1996). Evidence from several studies suggests, however, that though adults' involvement is quantitatively and qualitatively different from traditional age students (Aslanian & Brickell, 1988; Frost, 1991; Graham & Donaldson, 1996), they experience as much personal, social, and cognitive growth in college (Kuh, 1993; Graham & Donaldson, 1996, in press).

This evidence suggests two things: (a) that the processes by which adults achieve successful college outcomes may differ from those of traditional age students and (b) that these different processes also may lead to different types of college outcomes for adults. The latter observation is supported by Kasworm's (1997) research in which she reported that adults make distinctions between academic and "life world" knowledge structures and have different stances about the degree to which they integrate or keep these two knowledge structures separate. These findings draw into question the adequacy of defining college outcomes solely from an academic knowledge structure point-of-view, the perspective used in most college outcome and involvement studies. Therefore, there are gaps in current theory and research related to

conceptions of college outcomes for adults and the processes by which they achieve these outcomes.

Purpose and Research Questions

The purposes of this exploratory study were to begin to address these gaps by investigating (a) how adults define success in college, thereby tapping conceptions of successful college outcomes as adult students describe and define them, and (b) adults' perception of the relationship between their learning, their experiences in and out of the classroom, and successful college outcomes, as they defined them. Two major research questions were used to address these purposes:

- How do adult undergraduate students define success in college?
- What factors do adult undergraduate students believe contribute to their success as they define it?

Orienting Frameworks

We used three major theoretical perspectives to frame the initial questions posed in the study -- (a) involvement theory (Astin, 1996), (b) explanations of adult students' success in college derived from cognitive learning and motivational theories, and (c) Kasworm's (1997) classification of the "stances" or "voices" of returning adult students toward different knowledge structures.

Involvement theory was employed to orient our exploration of adults' perceptions of experiences and factors that helped or hindered their achieving successful college outcomes. Traditional student involvement in college, including student-student interactions (Levine, 1994) and faculty-student interactions (Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991), contribute to the

student's level of integration with the academic life of the institution (academic integration), and the social life of the campus (social integration) (Bean, 1990; Tinto, 1987). Both the academic integration and social integration combine to enhance the level of student learning and personal development achieved (Astin, 1996). These posited relationships however appear not to hold fully for adult undergraduates. Therefore issues deserving exploration include the extent to which involvement theory or its different mechanisms relate to adults, the possibility that involvement may be achieved in different ways by adults, and the prospect that other factors equally or more important than involvement contribute to adults' success in college.

Several factors, which draw upon cognitive learning and motivational theories, have been used to explain why adults do well in college: (a) adults integrate new learning with existing knowledge schema by reflecting on earlier rich, personal experiences to "make meaning" with new material and understand it in a way that is a transformation of their own previous understandings (Kasworm, 1997; Kasworm & Blowers, 1994); (b) adults achieve, through their adult roles and responsibilities, a more "authentic" form of involvement in which they make meaning from their learning and develop more flexible forms and uses of knowledge (Graham & Donaldson, 1996; Hughes & Graham, 1990; Kasworm, 1995,1997); (c) adults approach their college experiences with a clearer purpose in mind, take the advice of instructors more seriously and are more intent on learning (Cupp, 1991; Frost, 1991; Kasworm, 1995); and (d) adults use the classroom more than traditional age students as a venue to intensify their learning in order to achieve additional benefits (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Donaldson, 1991; Kasworm, 1997; Kasworm & Blowers, 1994). Attention to these factors also helped orient the focus on the issues that were explored.

Finally, Kasworm (1997) identified several voices or "stances" toward learning that varied according to the nature and extent to which adult learners integrated their academic knowledge and personal knowledge structures or kept these knowledge structures separate. The "Entry Voice" was one used by students who maintained clear distinctions and boundaries between what they were learning in college and what they knew from their outside adult, life-world experiences. The "Outside Voice" was characteristic of students who used what they were learning in college to reinforce, illuminate, and validate the knowledge and expertise they had gained in their adult, life-world experiences. As such, their knowledge structures remained anchored to their out-of-college experiences. Students who had a "Straddling" stance toward learning were able to make connections between academic knowledge and their life world knowledge structures, but the connections they made fell short of integration. In contrast, students who possessed an "Inclusion" stance toward learning were characterized as having achieved, "integration of thought and action between life world . . . and their academic world of knowledge and understanding" (Kasworm, 1997, p. 38). As a result of this integration, these students were able to experience transformation of their knowledge structures.

These variations in "voices" suggest that adults may have conceptions of successful college outcomes that differ from conventional ones used in most outcomes and involvement studies. This theoretical perspective oriented the study toward an exploration of success in college as adult students defined it. As such, the present research extends Kasworm's research by exploring adults' conceptions of successful college outcomes and factors within their life experiences that relate to these conceptions of success.

Method

We employed a grounded theory approach in which subjects were allowed to "tell their stories," so that themes and relationships among them could emerge from the data. We conducted in-depth interviews with 13 returning adult undergraduate students at two higher education institutions (one Research I institution and one Baccalaureate College II institution). Subjects were recruited through nomination by instructors and peers based upon their willingness and ability to articulate their experiences as returning adult undergraduate students.

Subjects. Subjects were 27 years old or older, had been back in school for at least one year, and were purposefully selected to obtain as much variation as possible with respect to subjects' institution, gender, major, and enrollment pattern (Patton, 1990). Seven subjects attended part-time at the Baccalaureate institution; six of these seven were female. These students' majors included computer information systems, business, social work, and sociology. Six subjects attended the Research I institution and five of the six were female. Their majors were in psychology and education. Two of the six attended full-time; the remainder were part-time students.

Interview strategy. Interviews were semi-structured and centered around several questions addressing the learning experiences of the adult learners (e.g., Tell me a story that you will never forget about an important learning experience at this college. In regards to your college course work, how do you learn best? How will you define success in college?). The interview guide was developed collaboratively and iteratively by three members of the research team, with modifications being made in the guide on the basis of data collected in early interviews. (The interview guide is found in the Appendix.) Interviews lasted between 45

minutes and one and one-half hours. All interviews were audio-taped and transcribed. (Pseudonyms are used in the report of findings to maintain subjects' anonymity.)

The interview guide was developed to allow us to pursue themes and descriptions of experiences with subjects that subjects believed were important and meaningful to them. Purposive selection of subjects occurred over time, guided by the procedures of theoretic sampling in order to saturate categories identified through analysis of earlier interviews (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), and by the principle of maximum variation (Patton, 1990) to ensure variability in subjects interviewed. The interview process stopped after 13 subjects because each data category reached saturation (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Data analysis. Data analysis procedures adhered to those recommended by Strauss and Corbin (1990), with inductive data analysis strategies being employed (Patton, 1987). By asking questions, repeatedly validating the relationships and patterns against the data, and referring to prior research to verify and support the findings, several persistent themes surfaced allowing conclusions to evolve (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Initial data analysis was conducted independently by three research team members. Over the course of the study, two additional members were added to the research team and they too analyzed data independently. The following procedures were employed by each team member in analyzing data (Miles & Huberman, 1994):

1. Codes were attached to interview data.
2. Reflections and remarks were noted in the margins and a memoing system was established to create an audit trail (Merriam, 1988) of reflections and initial

coding by (a) team members who both conducted interviews and analyzed data, and (b) by team members who only analyzed data.

3. Notes were sorted and sifted "to identify similar phrases, relationships between variables, patterns, themes . . . (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 9).

4. A set of generalizations were gradually elaborated to cover consistencies in the data (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

The research team met over several months, comparing coding of data for consistency until agreement was reached on the categories and patterns identified.

Trustworthiness of data. Lincoln and Guba (1985) recommended the term "trustworthiness" to describe the quality, soundness, credibility, and consistency of qualitative data. Trustworthiness was ensured in this study by triangulation of data collected and of data analysis. Triangulation was achieved by using two sources of data: interviews and the audit trail created by the research team through its use of a memoing system. It was also achieved by involving five different people in the independent analysis of data and extensive meetings over several months to ensure consistency in data analysis procedures and in categories and patterns identified and their interpretation.

Findings

Two major categories of findings emerged -- (a) findings related to students' definition of success in college and (b) those associated with factors that either supported or hindered achievement of success as students defined it.

Adults' Definition of Success

Although subjects were asked to define what success in college meant to them, most made dramatically clear and mutually exclusive distinctions between success in college and success in learning. This differentiation was made on the basis of two dimensions – (a) ownership of knowledge and standards for judging success, with words like "theirs" and "mine" being used to connote ownership, and (b) the potentiality or actuality of the value of what was learned.

Success in college. Most subjects' definitions of success in college were associated with others' definitions or ownership of knowledge. These definitions also incorporated external, established standards for judging success and externally provided understandings of the potential, future value of the knowledge or the credential obtained. Students spoke of success in college as "meeting instructors' expectations," "getting the degree," "making good grades," and learning and obtaining knowledge of future value as instructors defined this potentiality for them.

As one subject pointed out, "you know, they [success in college and success in learning] are different." Lora (a pseudonym) echoed this sentiment, noting. "academically, success is getting the degree, achieving a goal, staying on track, and doing well within a program." Fred made distinctions between success as defined by grades and the relation between this definition of success and learning:

> I think from a real shallow standpoint, grades are a success. It indicates that you've met the expectations of the instructor. However, you can meet the expectations of the instructor and not learn a damn thing.

Each of these subjects and others defined success in college using standards and expectations established by others. As illustrated in the above quotations, these included

instructor standards for grades and institutional policies and procedures related to fulfilling requirements of a degree program. Still other subjects used other sources of external criteria for defining college success. Shirley, for example, used a definition established by her employer in noting, "My work views it [success in college] as being qualified for a higher position once I graduate." Susan shared a similar evaluation: "Success in college is defined by what you can do with your education when you're finished. Success in learning; that's completely, completely different."

In contrast to the dimension of external criteria for defining success in college was subjects' use of their own standards and criteria for defining success -- in this case success in their learning. Illustrative of this distinction made by subjects is the differentiation Lora made between others' and her own standards in judging success:

> I think there's a lot of ways of learning that go on. You know, there's empty A's. You may get an A and be successful in that course and in the eyes of the teacher, have been successful. But in my opinion, it didn't make a darn bit of difference how I did in that course because it doesn't apply to me.

Potentiality for use of what was learned also was characteristic of subjects' definitions of success in college. Rather than recognizing actual use in the present or short-term, they discussed usage as potential – as in using it to get a promotion or get another job as described above in some of their own words. This potentiality was at times recognized by subjects themselves, but several subjects also attributed their understanding of this potentiality to their instructors' definition of it. One subject noted, for example, "I don't know . . . what's actually important for applications until I have someone telling me what you're going to use this for and that comes from advisors and professors."

Success in learning. In contrast to subjects' definition of success in college, subjects defined success in their learning in terms of their ownership of knowledge and standards, and in terms of the "actuality" or direct experience with the value of what they had learned or were learning. Subjects talked, for example, about being able to learn "what was applicable to me," "learn what I wanted to learn," "applying what I learn in class to my job," and using what I learn so "I can talk knowledgeably with others."

The following quotations from subjects illustrate the ways they defined success in learning. They used their own criteria for defining success. They spoke of making what they learned their own knowledge, and they personally recognized the actuality of how they could use what they were learning, rather than having usage defined for them by others:

> And I think, to me, that's what learning is all about, is to be able to take what you've done in psychology and apply it to your real life . . . And so by taking these things in school and applying them . . . to my real life . . . to me that was a learning experience.

> So for me being successful in learning is believing I have learned information that I will be able to apply out of school that will in some way advance society. . . And a lot of it has to do with the standards you set for yourself. I could much more easily get through the program . . . if I was willing to get by. But I find that unacceptable for myself. . . So a lot of my learning comes from realizing its importance to me both now and in the future and what significance I place on it.

> The way that I know that I've learned is that I've integrated that. I can sort of make it mine.

Factors Contributing to Success

Dimensions that were foregrounded as supporting or hindering students' achievement of the two types of success included their (a) experience, (b) maturity, (c) motivation, (d) ability to be self-monitoring, (e) reinforcement systems, and (f) the nature and quality of their experiences

within the classroom. These, factors, identified by subjects to prompts about why they believed they were as or more successful, than traditional age students, pointed to dimensions of their experience in returning to school that differed from the factors conventionally used to explain successful collegiate outcomes for traditional age students.

Experiences. Subjects described three kinds of experiences they believed contributed to their success in college and in their learning: prior experience, concurrent experience, and future experience. Each contributed in unique ways to their success. Prior experience, especially from work, helped them manage their time better and have the organizational skills to be efficient in their studies and make "[college] more valuable to me as a returning student." Prior experience also contributed to their maturity and a focus on different developmental tasks. Several subjects indicated, for instance, that one reason for their academic success was an ability to focus on academics rather than be concerned with certain social aspects of development, such as dating. They also employed what they learned from prior experience to connect with what they were currently learning. One subject, for example, talked of being able to "absorb" content, find it "more meaningful," "apply it," and "retain a lot more of it this time around," because she had understanding and knowledge from past experience with which to connect new information with her existing knowledge.

Concurrent experience included both in- and out-of-college experiences subjects had while attending college. They spoke of outside responsibilities they had at work, in volunteer activities, and in their families. They also noted that these experiences permitted them to incorporate what they had learned outside college into their studies and also apply what they were learning in college to their life worlds away from college. As one subject noted, "I think I

take more into the campus environment, things that you've learned in the real world and apply it to the campus environment. . . . I think I probably take more from life and apply it to school. But I do take things that I've learned at school. For example, the statistics course that I've just gotten finished with – now when I'm typing some of ____ research papers, I understand what he's talking about when I look at a table." However, outside work experiences did not always relate that well to what subjects were learning in college, placing limits on their ability to connect what they were learning in college and out. For example, one subject who was majoring in computer information systems noted that she did not use computers in her work and this limited her ability to apply what she was learning in college to her work context.

Future experience was defined by subjects' as having a correct and realistic view of the future based upon prior and concurrent experience. For example, one subject said she had an "accurate sense of the future based on my prior and current experiences." This more accurate and realistic view was purported by subjects to provide them, more than traditional age students, with a sense of what was more important about college and about what to learn for its future utility to them.

Maturity. As noted above, prior experience contributed to subjects' having a sense of maturity they believed traditional aged students did not have. It placed them at a different point in their developmental trajectory, permitting them to concentrate on learning rather than other developmental tasks that have been associated with traditional age students (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). In addition, subjects who reported more success in learning (as opposed to just having success in college) also spoke of how their maturation -- or having "gone down the road"

-- had prepared them to make good judgments about what they wanted to learn and how best to learn for different types of success.

Maturity was also associated with a work ethic and set of values that these adults believed contributed to their success. They spoke, for instance, of how they were "self-determined," "disciplined," and "confident." The also noted that they had "set high standards for self," were "highly focused with a commitment of time and energy" to their studies, had a "strong work ethic," and "intrinsic values centered around learning."

Motivation. Subjects also reported a variety of intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors that contributed to their success. Intrinsic factors included 'personal satisfaction" in completing college, being "goal oriented," providing a "role model for children," desiring a better life, and being "dedicated to learning rather than earning a grade." Some of the adults spoke of time as a motivating factor, noting that for them, "time was running out" for them to complete college. A few others also noted that they were motivated by the desire 'to show others" that they indeed could be successful in college.

Most subjects reported two major, related extrinsic motivators for their success – paying for college themselves and seeing college as an "investment,' for additional money and for their careers. A few were also motivated to do well to respond to the expectations of others, including their instructors where "receiving good grades" provided positive reinforcement for their efforts.

Self-monitoring. Four inter-related dimensions comprised this theme: management and learning strategies, monitoring of context, monitoring of strategies, and monitoring of self. Subjects identified a range of strategies they employed to be successful in their learning and in college. Six subjects noted that repetition, practicing formulas and working problems helped

them be successful. Five said they routinely outlined chapters and their notes and focused on their writing. Five mentioned the importance of having good time management and organizational strategies they had learned from prior and concurrent work experiences. Still others mentioned the strategies of cramming, preparing in advance, using mnemonic devices, limiting their focus (not trying to consume everything) and seeking help through support groups. Subjects also noted they used different strategies to achieve different types of success -- e.g., subjects cramming to get good test grades, realizing knowledge retention would be fleeting (success in college), in contrast to focusing on deeper understanding and improved retention gained through active in-class participation in small group discussions and projects (success in learning).

While subjects employed these diverse strategies, they also were able to monitor the contexts in which they worked so they gained maximum value from their academic efforts. Four spoke of selecting a special place to study and one spoke of the necessity of studying alone. Thus they joined use of strategies with an ability to monitor the contexts in which these strategies were employed. They also monitored their use of strategies for different purposes. Several subjects spoke of 'drawing on different learning techniques" depending on the what they were learning and the use to which they wanted to put it. Still others noted that they took multiple perspectives on different subjects to assist in their learning.

Subjects also demonstrated knowledge of self as learners, as well as the ability to monitor themselves in relation to the learning of different content and goals they had for learning. Subjects spoke of knowing their "limitations," "accepting themselves as they were," and having personal "expectations" for their work. They also talked about their awareness of the

"consequences" of their actions and learning strategies, and the "barriers" and "limits" to their learning and to their success.

Reinforcement systems. Subjects were engaged in four major reinforcement systems off-campus that impacted their success in either positive or negative ways. These systems included work, friends, family, and former teachers. Eleven of thirteen subjects noted that positive support and reinforcement was given from these systems. They spoke of employers who encouraged them to return to college and remained supportive of their efforts by providing time off, offering financial assistance, and providing a venue for them to incorporate in their work what they were learning in college. They talked about friends and family members who encouraged them, who provided childcare while they attended class, and who helped them find time to study. And three talked about former teachers who remained a constant source of support and encouragement as they returned to college to further their education.

Despite these reported positive aspects of their reinforcement systems, subjects also spoke of reinforcement systems in negative ways. One mentioned an employer who did not value her return to higher education and provided no support for her doing so – in fact the employer's demands often interfered with her academic pursuits. Others mentioned spouses or other family members who did not support re-entry into college, a situation that created stress for the subjects and interfered with their studies.

Classroom experiences. Subjects' experiences in the classroom either contributed to their success in college and/or in learning, or interfered with it. They defined their classroom experiences across four dimensions – social engagement, knowledge connection, motivation, and instruction.

Subjects spoke of the classroom as providing a venue for their connecting with others, as their primary place for engagement on campus, due to lack of time for conventional forms of involvement. They talked about the importance of peer-relationships developed in the classroom. Although these peer relationships provided them with a way to engage socially, they also noted that before class, in class, during breaks, and after class, interactions with peers went beyond the social to focus on learning course subject matter. They recounted experiences of talking about content during breaks, and learning from peer descriptions of how content manifested itself in work experiences. One subject characterized this dimension as "socializing around learning and class," rather than around developing social relationships. Subjects also spoke of having "personal connections" with faculty members and working with them in an "overall tone of a peer relationship."

The classroom also provided a stage for subjects to connect what they were learning with what they already knew as a result of their prior or concurrent experiences off campus. Subjects talked about how they found certain classes to be related to their other life roles and to the real world. One characterized this dimension by noting that there was a "permeable boundary" between class and her off-campus experiences. Class experiences also provided a motivating factor for some subjects. These individuals highlighted, for example, especially difficult classes, like mathematics, that "provided motivation and challenge" for their learning.

Finally, subjects talked about instruction that facilitated their learning and their success in college. They spoke highly of professors who "were passionate about their subjects," "motivated students," "rewarded a student's efforts," and "had high expectations." Instructional strategies they identified as helping them learn included providing a structure that helped subjects fit their

studies into their larger patterns of adult life, providing effective "examples and explanations" of ideas, using "in-class discussion" of topics, and having subjects conduct "group projects that kept them actively involved" in their learning. However, six subjects also reported instances where instructors and instruction interfered with their success – especially in learning. They identified instructors who assumed students were homogenous, failed to understand different approaches to learning, and expected subjects to learn "irrelevant information." These negative evaluations were rare, however, when compared to the positive judgments subjects made about their experiences in the classroom and the central role it played in their learning.

Discussion

We began this paper by observing that existing frameworks for explaining college outcomes appear to be less than satisfactory for returning adult students. We noted, for example, that despite lower levels of involvement on-campus with peers and others, adult students report equal or better outcomes from college than their traditional aged counterparts (Graham & Donaldson, 1996, in press), drawing into question the application of involvement theory for explaining adults' success in college and in their learning.

Others have likewise called for new conceptions to help us understand and explain how adult students achieve the outcomes they do. Kasworm (in Donaldson, Graham, Kasworm, & Dirkx, 1999), for example, identified two historic theoretical research lenses that have been the dominant constructs for explaining collegiate participation, persistence, and outcomes -- the *Talent Development* frame developed by Astin (1996) and the *Cultural Community* frame developed by Tinto (1987). As we have noted, our research and that of others has drawn into question the validity of the *Talent Development* frame for adult learners. The *Cultural*

Community frame posits that retention and outcomes are a function of the degree to which learners are integrated into the collegiate culture, and achieve congruence between self and that culture. According to this construct, failure to be socialized into the collegiate culture results in marginalization of learners, which impacts both their persistence and the outcomes they are realize from college. Thus, strategies to achieve assimilation by adult students focus attention on helping them adjust to the new environment they are entering (e.g., Chartrand, 1990). The results of this study suggest, however, that adults are able to succeed in college despite not fully fitting in, being fully adjusted to the campus environment, or experiencing full congruence between their selves and the collegiate culture. In fact, this study's results suggest that adults' very difference, marginal status, and incongruence with the traditional collegiate culture fosters their learning, permitting them to experience success in college, as well as success in learning that they own and can actually apply in their lives.

Donaldson, Graham, Kasworm, and Dirkx (1999) also take issue with both historic lenses, suggesting instead that alternative frameworks need to be developed. In doing so, they echo Pascarella and Terenzini (1998) who have noted:

> . . . scholars of college impacts on students have been substantially less sensitive to the kinds of personal growth and maturing that may occur when students must meet work, family, and educational responsibilities simultaneously. The challenge confronting such students may lead to substantial growth along dimensions not typically considered in the existing body of research. Indeed, some of our most cherished ideas about the important purposes and outcomes of a postsecondary education may have little relevance for an increasing number of undergraduate students (pp. 153-154)

Two of the research team (Donaldson & Graham, in Donaldson, Graham, Kasworm, & Dirkx, 1999) have developed a model of college outcomes for adults that incorporates many of the

findings of the present study. The model consists of six components: (a) *Prior Experience and Personal Biographies*, (b) *Psycho-social and Value Orientations*, (c) *Adult Cognition*, (d) *Life-World Environment*, (e) the *Connecting Classroom*, and (f) *College Outcomes*.

As this study has demonstrated, prior experience and personal biographies contribute to adults' motivations to return to college, provide them with existing mental models they use to facilitate their collegiate learning, and provide them with a "work ethic" and a set of self-monitoring skills they employ to guide their learning. Adults' motivations to attend college were reported by subjects of the current study to be an important contributor to their success. What subjects knew from prior and concurrent experience and their metacognitive skills in monitoring what they knew, who they were, and how they learned (adult cognition) were also reported as factors related to their success.

Subjects' life-world environments of work, family, and volunteer duties, as well as their reinforcement systems, acted to support or hinder their learning. Subjects used the classroom as a stage for engaging or connecting with others, relating their in-class learning with their life-world knowledge structures, and negotiating meaning for their learning. They reported their success in making these connections depended in large part upon the instruction they received. The outcomes they experienced from college went beyond those traditionally defined from an institutional point of view, to incorporate a focus on actual, not potential, application, and personal ownership of what they learned.

While the findings of the present study resonate well with Donaldson's and Graham's model, the findings of the present study also lend support to the results of other studies that have focused on specific aspects of adults' experience in college. For example, Cupp (1991) found

adults return to college highly motivated and with a clarity of purpose, a finding similar to this study's. Richardson and King (1998) reported on several studies that have demonstrated that adults have good time management and organizational skills, and study at a deeper level than their traditional aged counterparts, achieving depth of learning rather than mere retention of surface level ideas. Thus, adult's abilities to monitor themselves, their learning strategies, and their use of time does appear to be a contributing factor to their success – both in college and in their learning.

Kasworm and Blowers (1995) found, that once adults begin college, interactions between their life-world environments and their experiences in the classroom influence their cognition. This finding is consistent with ours about adults' abilities to connect their learning in school with what they already have learned and continue to learn in their off-campus work, family, and volunteer environments.

Kasworm (1997) reported that adults use the classroom as the center stage for making meaning. Further, Kasworm and Blowers (1994) reported that part-time adults attribute more meaning, than traditional aged students, to the relationships they develop with faculty members and their in-class learning experiences. Our findings are consistent with these results and support as well other evidence that for adults the classroom, and not conventional definitions of involvement, is the central venue for their learning (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Dill & Henley, 1998; Donaldson, 1991).

Finally, while the different stances toward learning identified by Kasworm (1997) were not replicated exactly in this study, differences in subjects' definition of success nevertheless highlight distinctions adult students make between academic knowledge structures (required to

be learned to succeed in college) and the knowledge for which they claim ownership for actual application in their own lives. These distinctions also underscore possibilities for students to maintain clear boundaries between these knowledge structures (entry or outside voices) or connect them (straddling or inclusion voices). We in fact found that some of our subjects focused almost exclusively on success in college, suggesting they were maintaining distinctions between their learning on-campus and off. Others (the majority of respondents) spoke of strategies they employed to achieve success in their learning, making connections to their life-world environments and knowledge structures. Thus, the present research, as well as that of Kasworm, underscore Pascarella's and Terenzini's call for a reconsideration of our definition of college outcomes for this set of undergraduate students.

Conclusions and Implications

The results of this study have highlighted the distinctions adult students are able to make between conceptions of successful college outcomes that are external to them and those that they have internalized. In addition, some dimensions of that internalization (i.e. ownership, actuality/potentiality) were identified that deserve further exploration with other students (both traditional and adult) in other settings. Several factors were also identified that, depending on their properties, contributed to or hindered achievement of one of the two types of success. These too deserve further exploration. The results also point to the need for determining how traditional age students define success in college and the degree of similarity between their definitions and adults'.

The results also raise critical policy questions for higher education: Do we need to redefine success in college in ways that have more powerful meaning for students – definitions of success that students own and have internalized, in contrast to those that are externally defined and imposed by our institutions and their faculty? And if we do this, what implications will this have for the purposes to which we educate and the strategies we employ to instruct and foster student development? Are student involvement and personal congruence with a college's culture, and the attendant strategies to achieve each, still the *sine qua non* of lenses for understanding and explaining persistence and success? Or, should other lenses be employed, lenses that will lead to new policies and strategies for achieving the outcomes that the academe and students desire?

It is to these research and policy questions that efforts need to be directed as higher education explores how best to facilitate the learning of a changing student body to meet societal expectations as we enter the next century.

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Appendix

Interview Guide

- Tell me a story that you will never forget about an important learning experience in this college.
- In regards to your college course work, how do you learn best?
- What aspects of your campus experience have influenced your learning – for better or worse?
- What aspects of your life outside the campus have influenced your learning – for better or worse?
- There is reason to believe that older undergraduate students generally would not do as well as more traditional-age students due to family and work responsibilities, rusty academic skills, less time for course work, etc. Yet, most studies find they do as well or better than traditional students. Why do you think this is so?
- If you feel you learn as well as traditional age students, how do you manage to do that?
- How will you define success in college?

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