A Critical Review of Adult Learners and Student Government: Recommendations for
Practice

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Introduction

Colleges and universities provide students with numerous opportunities to become involved on campus. These activities are based on the assertion that involvement will lead to higher levels of satisfaction, higher grade point averages, and increased retention rates. Additionally, opportunities for involvement are believed to assist students with their personal and professional growth and development, including moral and identity development (Evans, 2003). Engagement can occur through curricular and co-curricular means. Students may become engaged through their academic programs, through faculty and student interactions, and through clubs, organizations, and events. One formal structure for student involvement includes student government.

Student government associations are in place to represent the needs of students to administrators and faculty (Laosekian-Buggs, 2006). Because student governments exist in order to give students a voice on campus, all students should have access to student government involvement, including opportunities to serve as student government leaders. Contemporary student government associations, however, are often structured to fit the needs, and schedules of, full-time, traditional-aged students. In order to participate as student government officers, students must adhere to specific criteria. In some cases, students must be full-time students, must live within a certain number of miles of campus, may not be permitted to hold outside jobs, and must be available during the summer months to prepare their administrations. Such regulations may prevent adult learners from participating in student government.

Adult students have different needs and time constraints than traditional-aged students. If adult students are to receive the benefits of engagement, they must have

opportunities to become engaged. If administrators value the experience and diverse backgrounds that adult students bring to higher education, structures must be examined to ensure that they are appropriate for the needs of all students. Student services staff and administrators need to change their strategies and structures in order to meet the needs of adult learners (Compton, Cox, & Laanan, 2006). It is possible for a student population to change dramatically while the services and activities remain unchanged. That rigidity and incongruence does not serve students well. An unwelcome environment can lead to dissatisfaction, disappointment, and a lack of effort to become involved in the future. In order for student government to serve as an effective mechanism for student engagement, the needs of adult learners and the structure of student government must be examined.

Background of the Study

Adult Learners

Adult learners can be defined as individuals age 25 and older who are engaged in postsecondary learning (Voorhees & Lingenfelter, 2003). Adult learners have specific reasons and goals for attending college, including obtaining skills that will assist them professionally (Compton et al., 2006; Ritt, 2008) and transitioning to a new phase in their lives (Aslanian, 2001). Adult learners, as a group, are more diverse than traditional-aged students. They have different experiences with institutions of higher education, attend college for different reasons, and have different expectations of their college or university (Richardson & King, 1998). For example, unlike their traditional-aged peers, adults often enter institutions of higher education in order to gain new skills and to become more familiar with technology (Compton et al., 2006).

Adults often enter colleges and universities as a result of a major life change, including divorce, loss of a job, or death of a spouse (Compton et al., 2006). Their life experiences can serve as an asset. Adult students can be regarded as more capable of success because of the experiences they bring to their coursework and because of the experiences they have confronting barriers (Richardson & King, 1998).

Adult-centered institutions are characterized by offering flexible practices and relating to each adult student as an individual (Mancuso, 2001). Colleges and universities can design programs and services to address the needs of specific student populations, including adult learners (Cook & King, 2005). Some of the flexible services that adult learners may benefit from include extended hours and on-line options (Chickering & Reisser, 1993).

Entering college can create additional stress in an adult's life (Compton et al., 2006); they have many demands on their time, including work responsibilities and time spent commuting to campus (Kasworm, 1990; Schlossberg, Lynch, & Chickering, 1989). Additionally, adult learners are not always interested in joining clubs and activities, because they consider their social lives outside the college or university (Compton et al., 2006) and adult students do not have a great deal of time available to spend on campus activities and programs.

Student Engagement

Student engagement has been found to have positive effects on academic achievement and persistence (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates, 2005; Kuh, 2003; Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, and Gonyea, 2008). Engagement includes the time that

students spend in curricular and co-curricular activities, as well as the ways institutions choose to involve the students in such activities (Kuh, 2003).

Examples of activities include, but are not limited to, learning communities, orientation, first-year seminars, internships, and mentoring (Forest, 1985; Kuh et al., 2005; Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2007; Wang & Grimes, 2001). Engagement in such activities can positively affect academic and social integration, as well as lead to positive overall feelings toward their experience in college (Zhao & Kuh, 2004). In order for services to positively affect student success, the programs must be designed for the students of that institution and the institution as a whole should be dedicated to student success (Kuh et al., 2005).

Involvement in campus activities helps students develop relationships with peers, which can positively impact social development and academic success (Astin, 1984; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Rendon, 1994; Tinto; 1993). Research supports the connection between social involvement and academic success for traditional-age college students (Astin, 1993; Kuh et al., 2005; Pace, 1984; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Pascarella, Flowers, & Whitt, 2009; Tinto, 1993). Encouragement to become involved on campus, including student organizations and educationally purposeful activities, can come from staff members (Braxton & McClendon, 2001-2002; Kuh et al., 2005; Kuh et al., 2007).

Involvement in activities designed to enhance the educational experience has a positive effect on learning (Astin, 1993; Feldman & Newcomb, 1969; Pace, 1984; Pascarella & Ternezini, 1991). Learning occurs when students can successfully integrate their academic and social activities and experiences (Chickering, 1974; Newell, 1999).

Information gained outside the classroom can be understood by the students on a deeper level and can become more meaningful (Zhao & Kuh, 2004). When students are involved and active in college, that engagement and desire to learn and grow can continue throughout their lives after college (Shulman, 2002).

Discussion

Barriers to participation in higher education for adults may include personal, professional, and institutional obstacles (Ritt, 2008). Boundaries viewed by adult students can include child care, parking, and access to services. Sometimes, tasks that are easily accomplished by traditional students, such as obtaining a student identification card or meeting with a financial aid representative, can include a great deal of work and inconvenience for an adult student. Adult students have jobs, family responsibilities, and are often times entering the classroom after being away from formal education for several years. Adult students often make tremendous sacrifices to enroll in college.

Research is lacking regarding the role of socialization and the success of adult learners (Lundberg, 2003). Because student engagement can positively affect academic performance and the development of critical thinking skills (Carini, Kuh, & Klein, 2006), however, engagement can benefit all students. One way for students to become involved is through their student government association. Typical responsibilities of a student government include distributing student fees, recognizing official student clubs and organizations, coordinating activities, and representing the student body to institutional leaders (Laosebikan-Buggs, 2006). Activities traditionally provided by a student government may or may not be applicable to adult students.

An institution's student government may be operating under the same mindset as 50 or 100 years ago. It may be worthwhile to examine how a student body has changed since the institution was founded and revise the student government structure and constitution, as well as activities the student government is responsible for, to reflect the student demographics and mission of the institution today.

If administrators believe that student government is the voice of students, all students should have a voice. Otherwise, student government is the voice of students representing specific sub-populations, a challenge of many student governments (Mackey, 2006; Miller & Nadler, 2006). Adult students may provide a fresh voice to student government. Because of their personal experiences and professional experiences, adult learners may view concerns differently that traditional students who entered college directly from high school. Adult students may interact with administrators, faculty, and fellow students differently.

<div align="center">Recommendations</div>

Adult learners often have different concerns than how to become involved on campus. For many students, academic success is a priority. Adults are interested in gaining knowledge to help them create successful lives (Shacham & Od-Cohen, 2009). If administrators want adult learners to become involved, they need to determine how to reach these students and how to demonstrate that these types of activities are worth their time. If student government is structured so that it is more accessible for adult students, it may become more accessible to other student populations. The involvement of adult students may also increase the overall interest in student government, increasing numbers of students involved, which may be beneficial to all student governments.

Adult learners may not be aware that student government exists. If they see a poster or receive an email about joining student government, they may dismiss it because they may not think it applies to them. Institutions of higher education need find innovative and creative ways to involve students, making them feel welcome to participate in events and programs (Compton et al., 2006). Students and staff may need to determine ways to interest adult students in student government. For example, adult learners often think of themselves as employees more than they consider themselves students (Compton et al., 2006). If institutions can demonstrate the benefits of student government involvement in terms of building skills of interest to employers, students may be more likely to participate.

Traditional students serving in leadership roles may be content with limited involvement of adult learners. It may never occur to traditional-aged students to open the student government to adult learners. In that situation, student government advisors may need to share the concept with the traditional-aged student government leaders. If adult students were to truly be part of the structure, all aspects of student government would need to be examined, such as the times meetings were held, rules regarding part-time students serving on student government, and policies regarding employment. Thought would also need to be spent determining how best to contact adult students and let them know that student government is an option for them. Because adult students have so many demands on their time, they need to be aware of the exact time commitment and the benefits of student government involvement. Adult learners may have very different concerns than those of traditional students. The presence of adult learners may lead to student governments focusing on different causes and working on different goals.

Every student is an individual with different needs and expectations. Adult learners may not be interested in becoming involved in activities such as student governments. Involvement should be a choice. Students should be given options for engagement and be given the opportunity to make their own choices. If a program or activity is supposed to exist, however, for all students, the program should be structured so that all interested students can participate, and experience the benefits of that involvement.

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