

Higher Education for Working-class Adults—Together, We Can Make it Work

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Abstract

This literature review demonstrates that many working-class adult-learners continue to face challenges during their quest for new meaning in their lives. Many adults in workplace settings find themselves in environments with very little support. Consequently, adult learners rely on the academic community as their main source of emotional and academic support. Currently, many colleges do not offer adult learners effective student services and support. Research suggests a coming together of authentic college leadership is needed to meet adult learners' needs and career-oriented goals. Taken together, the availability of more college co-op programs with offerings of incremental academic and workplace achievement could effectively address adult learners' needs and concurrently contribute to the successful achievement of their academic goals.

Keywords: *Working-class Adults, Imposter Syndrome*

Background

Marade and Brinthaupt (2018) found that individuals of varying ages reported experiences of conflict while making decisions regarding their academic careers. This is a matter of great importance considering the fact that educational choices are rated highest above all for many adults when it comes to regrets. In fact, during the early 2000s, Roese and Summerville (2005) revealed that the biggest regret for adults is their educational choices. Several years later, Choi and Jun (2009) found similar results. Choi and Jun's respondents reported the following feelings of regret: "they wished they could have or felt that they should have continued their education or finished school" (p. 218). It is quite understandable that choices involving education could be the most regrettable because during the past several decades, many of life's outcomes of higher potential have become more and more dependent upon educational achievements.

Life outcomes dependent upon educational achievements can include employment status, financial status, and consequently, personal fulfillment and the quality of family life. The challenge to achieve academic advancement and related preferred life outcomes affects millions of people. In fact, there are currently 31 million adult learners who are multiple-term college enrollees with less than two years of achieved college credits (ACE, 2017). One explanation for this dilemma is that it can be a major challenge for some adult learners to maintain a college career. For many adult learners, attending college, studying, working, and raising a family requires a balancing act between being a worker and a student. This can be best described as having limited time and unlimited commitments.

Seventy-six percent of adult learners feel that their lives are not balanced (bncollege, 2017). Prompted by this and other relevant findings, this study set out to examine some of the challenges that working-class adult learners experience and explain how achieving progress in increments can be a valuable process in helping them to achieve their academic and career goals. This literature review begins with a discussion about working-class adult learners feeling unbalanced.

An alarming fact about individuals feeling unbalanced is that it can create perceptions of failure (Craig, Brown, & Baum, 1995). Therefore feeling unbalanced can be problematic for an individual, and it should be addressed as a part of the adult learner discussion. One may ask, how can feeling unbalanced lead to a self-perception of failure? This is best answered with an explanation from a cognitive perspective.

From a cognitive perspective, information pertaining to the self is more vigorous in memory recall compared to information not related to the self (Lieberman, Jarcho, & Satpute, 2004). Consequently, if an individual is experiencing moments of a negative state of thought this reinforcing negative perception of the self has the potential of being instigated prior to any other thought. In relating these thought patterns to the self and academics, Xu, Solanki, McPartlan, and Sato (2018) pointed out the following: When gauging elements that contribute to an individual's academic success, there is much more to be considered than solely the academic component of education. The researchers explained that the consideration of the social-psychological component of academic success and its effects on students is of great importance.

The social-psychological component of academic success (Xu et al., 2018) involves perceptions of the self and the self as it is compared to others. For example, a student's perception that they are the only one in a class experiencing a particular issue or a student's lack of a sense of belonging each have the potential to interfere with their academic success (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Strayhorn, 2012). Building upon Craig et al. (1995) and Lieberman et al. (2004), it becomes easier to understand how feeling unbalanced can lead to a student's lack of a sense of belonging, and ultimately, perceptions of failure. Eventually, it evolves into a status of one feeling like an imposter and being in a place that they don't belong.

The Imposter

In discussing the imposter syndrome, Murray-Johnson (2018) eloquently stated that the feeling of being an imposter is "widely characterized by a strong sense of personal inauthenticity and the general sense of feeling like a fraud." (p. 2). Murray-Johnson put forth a noteworthy account of the view of Brookfield (1991). In fact, Brookfield (2015), in reiterating his original point, stated that in experiencing impostership, many students perceive a lack of talent to such a degree that they don't even feel that they belong in college.

In discussing working-class learners taking leaps of faith, through her own personal narrative, Vickie Claflin (2018) opened a window that revealed, first-hand, some of a working class adult learner's perceptions. In doing so, she provided an inside look at this issue that is affecting many adult learners today—feeling out of place. Claflin described her first concern: her perception of being older than most freshmen who begin college. She also described her first class/professor interaction. The interaction was not inspiring. To the contrary, rather than being a welcoming interaction, it was a dialogue from a professor that basically consisted of a warning to members of the class to take a good look at each classmate now while you have a chance, because two out of each three will not make it through the entire academic journey.

It is unsettling to know that this type of message could be communicated to students at such a critical time in their lives, the beginning of their academic journey. However, that was indeed their reality at the time. Claflin felt as if the professor was talking directly to her, making her feel as if she were undoubtedly an imposter in that college classroom. Olson's (2018) description of a

working class learner's dilemma is equally valuable. She described it as a feeling of in-betweenness (p. 8) and a "struggle between what was and what is" (p. 7). Olson's perspective is of great value to the adult learner discussion, because her descriptions help demonstrate that there can be many variations in adult learners' self-perceptions based on the individual and the situation at hand.

In actuality, the spectrum can be quite extensive when it comes to reasons that college students perceive that they are out of place in an academic setting. It can range from a low self-perception of academic knowledge to a low self-perception of socio-economic status as compared to others, as well as numerous other issues regarding the self. In either case, the most important thing to keep in mind is that it does not necessarily have to be permanent. The narrative of Laura Lee Douglas (2018) conveyed this overall message to working class adult learners. Douglas stated that in the end, it is a process of making others' place our place.

Altogether, Claflin, Olson, and Douglas address the heart of the issue for adult learners. Adult learners are taking leaps of faith in an effort to make more meaning of their lives (Lindeman, 1926) by attempting to make a more fulfilling place, their place. In doing so, there are periods of impostership stemming from feeling out of place. Hence, they experience feelings of being somewhere between their past and their potential future. Olson (2018) stated that her past and future coexist. She noted that in her carrying bag, one would find a pair of business casual shoes and an outfit—always ready when needed. Olson's coexistence seems very similar to that of the waitress, the laborer, or the custodian, who would need a change of clothes handily ready and waiting in order to attend a college course after work. In many cases, the working-class adult learner's life is in a constant state of coexistence. This is because working-class adult learners do not have the luxury of time to plan out a full long-term four-year plan. Many adult learners are learning in the moment and have to approach their education in increments—one piece at a time. This method can indeed take longer to accomplish a goal; nonetheless, it can be quite effective. To that point, in an earlier study pertaining to creative outcomes, Marade, Gibbons, and Brinthaup (2011) demonstrated that a "progress in increments" strategy is an effective way of accomplishing goals and maintaining motivation to continue achieving success.

Progress in Increments

Internships and co-op programs are designed to provide incremental achievements can be beneficial to working-class adult learners because they would fit adult learners' needs and concurrently, on their timeframe. For example, many working-class adult learners are results-oriented learners and their needs are more of a current nature as opposed to many long-term goals of traditional-age students. In fact, a study by Styers, Dye, Peery, Cosby, and Haden (2017) demonstrated that incremental progress can be effective.

The Styers et al. (2017) study found that students working toward certification through a six-month college co-op program achieved academic success, gained employment, increased their income, and demonstrated increased positive perceptions of their academic potential to the point of continuing beyond certification and earning their college degree. In due course, via working toward certification and simultaneously achieving incremental academic and workplace success, the students of the Styers et al. study effectively developed a sense of belonging and made each of those places—the academic environment, and the workplace—feel like places of their own.

It follows that incremental achievements via internships or co-ops can be positive results that can lead to an increased sense of belonging, increased positive motivation, and additional accomplishments. Moreover, if the pay earned through the internship or co-op were to be more than an adult learner may have been currently earning, the increase in pay could lead to less hours of work and more hours of study and academic activities, which in turn could lead to even more accomplishments (see Figure 1).

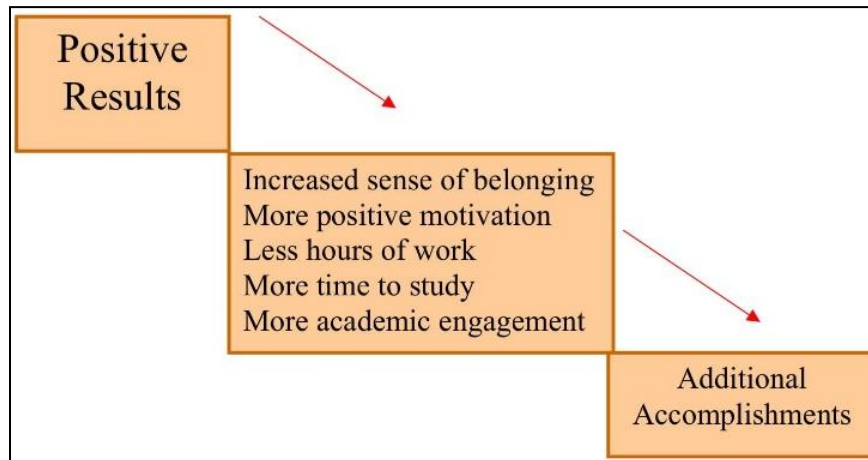


Figure 5. Progress in Increments (© 2019 Angelo Marade)

The relevance of this discussion at the current time is that research indicates that many adult learners’ needs and concerns have not been properly addressed. In fact, at one point, 42% of community colleges offered no student services or special programs at all for adult learners (NASPA, 2014). Numerous calls are being made for more effective student services (ACE, 2017; Blumenstyk, 2018; Jackson, 2019).

Concerns related to adult learners’ ability to maintain college careers has risen to such a high level, suggestions are being openly made in regards to how to improve. One organization straightforwardly emphasized: leaders and policy makers “need to be willing to adopt policies and practices that meet the needs of post-traditional learners” (ACE, 2017, p. 16). Additional comments conveyed similar messages. For example, it has been stated that attention should be given not only to the services being considered, but also the value of the services as they pertain to adult learners’ needs (Blumenstyk, 2018; Jackson, 2019).

Jackson (2019) stated it bluntly: It is time to put an end to symbolic college programs and implement useful and effective student service programs. Fortunately, many colleges are currently re-examining their strategies as they pertain to adult learners’ needs. It would be most fortunate for the academic community as a whole to see more college programs designed to more specifically serve working class learners.

Fifty-six percent of adult learners are considered to be workers who study in an effort to enhance their careers (National Center for Education Statistics, 2003). Sixty percent of students attend college to earn more income (Erisman & Steele, 2015). Eighty-eight percent of students attend colleges with jobs being their main goal (Busteed, 2019). That said, research suggests the need for change in the way many colleges are operating. Research highlights what needs to be examined. For example, “too many students are either not completing degrees or are completing

programs that are not valued by employers” (U.S. Department of Education, 2015, p. 2). Many employers validated that point. In fact, only 11% of business leaders surveyed strongly agreed that people are ready for jobs and careers (Busteed, 2017).

We are currently at a crossroads where adult learners are becoming the majority of students enrolling in our colleges (ACE, 2017). Even more, Murchison (2017) suggested that there would be a 21% increase in the number of adult learners by 2022. If adult learners concerns are not addressed, these problems are likely to become worse. All told, co-op programs with incremental academic and workplace achievements should be more of a focal point and a destination to reach by colleges who intend to be of authentic service to working class learners.

Conclusion

Thirty-one million adult learners are currently repeatedly taking leaps of faith in an effort to achieve new meaning in their lives by attending college. These working-class learners need more support and student services in place to help them achieve their goals. A coming together of college leadership, policy makers, and department heads is needed to address adult learners’ true concerns. The concerns that affect adult learners most are career- and work-oriented. It follows that the availability of more co-op programs with offerings of incremental academic and workplace achievement could effectively address adult learners’ true concerns and enhance their academic success. This could also help adult learners meet today’s employers’ preferences for career readiness.

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