

“Assume I Don’t Know”: Adult Degree Completer Perceptions of a Portfolio Experience

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Abstract: In the fall of 2019, the University of Arkansas--Fort Smith enrolled an initial cohort of students in an adult degree completion program designed to combine previous college hours and current work experience that could be applied to additional college credit. The students were enrolled in a portfolio class in which they documented their prior learning toward one or more existing college courses within their degree plans. The researchers have identified strategies for eliminating barriers to instruction for returning students. This article will focus on the tools and techniques that have proven helpful in perceptual change within an eight-week adult degree completion portfolio course.

Keywords: prior learning assessment, PLA, adult degree completion, non-traditional students, barriers to learning

Adults 25 years and older who have a bachelor’s degree earn \$1,248 in median weekly earnings as compared to \$746 in median weekly earnings for those with only a high school diploma. Unemployment rates are also higher for those with only a high school diploma (3.7%) as compared to adults with a bachelor’s degree (2.2%) (Torpey, 2018). In Arkansas, only 23% of residents have achieved a bachelor’s degree or higher as compared to 32% of Americans overall (TownCharts.com, 2020). In Sebastian County, Arkansas, the statistic is worse: only 19.69% of Arkansas have achieved a bachelor’s degree or higher. Of Arkansans 25 and older, 23.8% have completed some college but failed to persist to degree completion (WorldPopulationReview.com, 2020).

University of Arkansas--Fort Smith (UAFS) is a regional comprehensive university with an enrollment of just under 7000. In 2019, UAFS created the Adult Degree Completion Program (ADCP) for adult students who had completed 30 credit hours of college previously, were age 25 or older, and had a minimum of five years of work experience. In addition, participants in the ADCP have life or work learning experiences that they can use to fulfill course objectives through a portfolio process. Students in the inaugural ADCP portfolio class completed coursework in which they identified and reflected on the barriers to degree completion they experienced.

The purpose of this study is to identify barriers that prevent adults from returning to school and/or become obstacles to degree completion once they are enrolled. The master research question is: What barriers do adult returning students perceive in both returning to college and/or persisting and completing degree requirements? Additional questions guiding the study follow:

- What barriers do adult returning students perceive to re-enrolling in college?
- What barriers do adult returning students perceive to persisting in the degree program once they are enrolled?
- What strategies do adult returning students use to overcome perceived barriers?

- How do the perceptions and attitudes of adult returning students change over time in an eight-week portfolio course?

Literature Review

Today's college student has changed dramatically over the last several years. According to the Lumina Foundation (2019), 37% of college students are 25 or older, and 46% are going to college for the first time. In addition, the Lumina Foundation states that 64% of college students work, with 40% of those students working full-time (2019). Adult learners have been defined as those over 24, with responsibilities such as work and family (NCES.ed.gov, 2019). Adult students returning to higher education institutions have often found barriers during this return process. "Previous research has found that two of the four biggest barriers that prevent adults from going back to school are time and money, the two others are family responsibilities and the scheduling of courses" (Klein-Collins, 2010, p. 43). Time management is challenging when taking on responsibilities of family, work and home (Colvin, 2012).

In addition, barriers such as concerns about their ability to succeed and negative past experiences with school are included in barriers to adult returning students. These barriers have been categorized by Ekstrom (1972) as institutional, situational and dispositional. Institutional barriers, according to Ekstrom, include admission practices, curriculum development, and financial aid. Situational barriers can include finance, transportation, childcare, family support, employer support, and significant life events (Eckstrom, 1972; Bergman, Cudney, Harding, He, & Saraiva, 2019). Intellectual activity concerns about the ability to succeed and fear of failure make up dispositional barriers, according to Eckstrom (1972).

The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) has conducted extensive research into the various aspects of the adult learner's situation, as well as ways to transfer life experiences into college credit. In 2010, CAEL sponsored a study of the relationship between college credit-earning prior learning assessments (PLA) and the accompanying student outcomes. Findings showed adult PLA credit earners were 2.5 times more likely to have completed a college degree than adult learners with no PLA credit (Klein-Collins & Hudson, 2017).

According to Bergman, Olson & Associates (2019), adult learners who return to college have stories that highlight admirable qualities:

The real story about returning adults includes strong and long-term performance in the workforce, strong familial connections and support systems, large networks, a laundry list of success and accomplishments in life, a self-directed approach to learning, and an achievement orientation and independence in the learning environment. (p. 12)

Providing opportunities for PLA credits that view the adult learner as a self-directed, motivated student will encourage deeper and more meaningful engagement throughout the coursework.

Methodology

The current research is a qualitative case study in which the authors examined the barriers to degree completion that adult students perceived. Students in an eight-week portfolio class completed course assignments in which they were asked about the barriers that kept them from returning to college and the barriers they were experiencing, now that they were actually enrolled in a program. In week two of the course, students were asked to identify barriers that prevented them from completing a degree. They also were asked to offer suggestions as to how UAFS can remove those barriers. In week seven of the course, students were asked to write a paragraph reflecting on each of the commonly identified barriers: time, cost, family responsibility, and course scheduling. Students were also asked to discuss if and how the portfolio class had helped reduce barriers, and about strategies they had used or planned to use to overcome barriers. The UAFS Institutional Review Board approved using the course work for the study; each participant completed an informed consent before written work was included in the dataset.

Nineteen students enrolled in the portfolio class; of those students, 15 participated in the study. Participants were adult students over the age of 25. Of the participants, 40% were male, and 60% were female. White participants made up 88% of the class, with 6% identifying as American Indian or Alaskan Native, and another 6% identify as African American or Black. All the participants worked full-time. Of the 15 respondents, 80% were married, and 20% were divorced. Ages ranged from 25 to 35 (20%), 36 to 45 (47%), 46-55 (20%), and 56-65 (13%). Annual earning ranged from \$25,000 to 34,999 (13%), \$35,000 to \$49,999 (20%), \$50,000 to \$74,999 (27%), and \$100,000-\$149,999 (13%). Students entered the program with varying numbers of exiting college credits; 7% of participants had 30 hours or less, 67% had between 31 and 60 hours, 13% had between 61 and 90 hours, and 13% had between 91 and 120 hours. First-generation college students made up 71% of the cohort.

Each of the three researchers independently coded the written assignments using emergent coding. The authors combined the individual coding schemes into a shared coding scheme.

Findings

Four themes emerged from the data: Sacrifice, Emotional Barriers, Juggling, and “Assume I Don’t Know”.

Theme 1: Sacrifice

Respondents discussed the ways in which personal sacrifices—of time, money, family, rest—were necessary to complete course work. One participant wrote: “Ultimately, my goal reaching self is hoping to influence my family members in a positive way by sacrificing my personal and family time to obtaining my degree.” Another wrote: “I will make other sacrifices along the path to degree completion, but the benefits of having a degree outweigh the cost to completion in my eyes.”

Theme 2: Emotional Barriers

Throughout written responses to assignments, respondents repeatedly used words indicating strong negative emotions such as *guilt*, *fear*, or *burden*. For example, a participant wrote, “The guilt of not being available when needed was just too much to bear,” while a different respondent struggled with “the fear of missing some of my daughter’s major milestones and achievements during her last two years of high school.” Other responses mentioned fear of being in class with “young traditional students” or “fear of technology.”

Theme 3: Juggling

Written responses used images of *balancing* or *juggling* to describe the experience of combining work, family, personal, and college responsibilities. One respondent wrote, “Basically, an adult student with a full-time job, a family, volunteer activities AND schoolwork is like a clustered-up mess sometimes and add to that all the various courses we have to take can be daunting, to say the least”. A newly married student responded, “I just recently got married, and the past year has been hard for me to juggle going to school, working full time, and making sure my house and husband were taken care of.” Another student responded, “I am currently typing this report in my car waiting on my grandson’s ball game to start.”

Theme 4: “Assume I Don’t Know”

Participants also stated that they did not know concepts that faculty and administrators apparently expected them to know:

Assume I don’t know. I don’t know some of the writing formats. I don’t know how best to choose the syllabi to portfolio. It would be great if some of the learning opportunities we will encounter from week to week could be “called out” a bit more during class time. A quick point in the right direction would allow a motivated learner to utilize time more effectively, and a higher confidence level would be a direct result.

Another student suggested, “A higher education institution can reduce barriers to adult learners by being patient and guiding students through the different steps to find information and how to go about it in the library.”

Recommended Strategies

In addition to the themes that emerged from the data, the data also included feedback from the students suggesting strategies that would help reduce barriers. These strategies included: Scheduling classes in eight-week terms, scheduling in-person classes at night, scheduling more fully online classes, focusing on processes, and providing multiple resources.

Discussion

The perceived barriers shared by the respondents in this study are congruent with previous research which categorized barriers as institutional, situational, and dispositional. The themes of

sacrifice and juggling are situational barriers—life situations that take precedence over or make difficult the work of returning to college. The emotional barriers theme identified in this study is similar to the concept of dispositional barriers, i.e. the negative emotions associated with a return to college. Finally, the “assume I don’t know” theme aligns with the concept of institutional barriers (Eckstrom, 1972; Bergman, 2019).

In a survey of 100 non-traditional adult learners, similar themes emerged including, finance, family, work, time-management, psychosocial and institutional barriers with finance identified as the number one barrier (Hunter-Johnson, 2017). Emotional barriers such as fear and apprehension were identified in a study (Genco, 2007) of adult students reentering college:

Some students stated they felt that age interfered with their ability to interact with traditional-aged students and affected their ability to be academically successful. Adult students are time conscious. College is only one of a myriad of time/role demands for the re-entry student. Work, family, and home responsibilities compete for time and energy. Returning students deal with these obstacles through family support, positive attitudes, faith, and the belief that education is a means to a better way of life. These re-entry students reported that orientation should address their concerns--one of the most pertinent being the anxiety and apprehension caused by returning to school as an older student. (p.51)

Another study found that psychological factors strongly influence how adults perceive their ability to succeed in education; factors such as self-esteem and locus of control may be barriers to adults improving employment and going back to school (Goto & Martin, 2009).

Hunter-Johnson (2017) described institutional barriers that are similar to the barriers assigned the theme of “Assume I Don’t Know” that emerged in the current study; in his study 34% of participants identified instructional barriers that included course times, registration process, course availability, and institutional bureaucracy as significant factors.. The need for an appropriate orientation experience for returning adult students is supported by Fairchild (2003), who suggested that holding orientations for adult learners may help them balance the demands of family, work, and college.

Findings from the current study then are consistent with previous research and inspired some changes in how the portfolio class and the ADCP are run at UAFS.

Adjustments to the Adult Degree Completion Program

Based on research findings, the ADCP has eliminated several situational, institutional, and emotional barriers for adult students. By providing a portfolio mechanism to capture prior learning time to degree, time to completion, and expense have been reduced for UAFS students. Based on the comments from the respondents, modifications have included an assigned financial aid specialist for each student, eight-week and online courses scheduled specifically for degree completers and mentoring of students by those that have already successfully obtained credit through the portfolio process.

Students now receive a fully online orientation with assignments that are explicitly directed to removing barriers. In addition to reading assignments on APA style, additional assignment drafts, and the use of a template to create the portfolio have been adopted. Guest speakers have also been incorporated into the portfolio class, including visits from librarians to demonstrate library resources; additionally, a video tutorial has been launched for ongoing student use. Another innovation is the introduction of faculty members who teach in the programs of study so that students can begin to develop relationships with their instructors.

Based on innovations, the ADCP has increased the participation of returning students with more than 60 adult students pursuing degrees in Organizational Leadership or in General Studies. A new program for Early Childhood Education majors will become a part of the ADCP beginning in spring 2021.

Plans for future research include additional surveys of the adult degree completion program students to examine how program changes and adoption of best practices affect the perceived barriers for returning students. Future research should focus on persistence and retention of adult degree completers both at UAFS and nationally as well as more work on developing best practices for student services for this population.

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