

Phyllis A. Cummins, Annabelle Arbogast, Kathryn McGrew & Peter Riley Bahr (2021): Barriers and Facilitators for Mid- and Later-Life Community College Students: The Role of Faculty. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, DOI: 10.1080/10668926.2021.1876783

Barriers and Facilitators for Mid- and Later-Life Community College Students: The Role of Faculty

Corresponding Author: Phyllis A. Cummins, Ph.D., Scripps Gerontology Center, Miami University. cumminpa@miamioh.edu (513) 529-2652

Annabelle Arbogast, M.A., Doctoral Candidate, Department of Sociology and Gerontology, Miami University. arbogaal@miamioh.edu

Kathryn McGrew, Ph.D., Scripps Gerontology Center, Miami University. mcgrewkb@miamioh.edu

Peter Riley Bahr, Ph.D. Center for the Study of Higher and Postsecondary Education, University of Michigan. prbahr@umich.edu

This manuscript has not been published elsewhere and has not been submitted simultaneously for publication elsewhere.

Date submitted: July 14, 2020 (date resubmitted 12_2_2020)

For additional information and the complete research report contact Phyllis A. Cummins, Senior Research Scholar, Scripps Gerontology Center, Miami University. cumminpa@miamioh.edu (513) 529-2652. Mailing address:

Phyllis A. Cummins
Scripps Gerontology Center, Miami University
100 Bishop Circle
396 Upham Hall
Oxford, OH 45056

Acknowledgements

This research was supported by the Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, through Grant R305A160156 to Miami University. The opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not represent views of the Institute or the U.S. Department of Education.

Abstract

This qualitative study of students in mid- and later-life (MLL; age 40 and older) sought to address the role faculty play in facilitating student success and how institutions support faculty, especially adjunct faculty. Adjunct faculty teach a majority of classes at community colleges but are not provided the same professional development opportunities as tenure track faculty and are often not well integrated into the college system. Data were collected in focus groups with faculty (both adjunct and tenured) and students, supplemented by key informant interviews, at multiple community colleges in a Midwestern state. MLL students are a heterogeneous group and often have more demands on their time than do younger students. Our findings on the critical role faculty members play in helping MLL students succeed suggest that providing additional support for faculty is a valuable investment for community colleges.

Barriers and Facilitators for Mid- and Later-Life Community College Students:

The Role of Faculty

Background and Objectives

The aim of this research was to investigate experiences and barriers to success for mid- and later-life (MLL) students enrolled in community colleges, as well as promising practices at the institution and classroom level to support the success of MLL students. More specifically, we sought to discover the types for supports students want from faculty to facilitate their success. Non-traditional age students represent a meaningful proportion of community college students: in 2018, 33% of community college students were 25 years of age and older and, of those, 27% were 40 years of age and older (National Center of Education Statistics [NCES], 2018). We report findings on the multiple roles that community college faculty play in MLL students' experiences and outcomes.

MLL community college students are incredibly diverse, representing a wide range of educational and work histories, skill sets, and academic and professional goals. However, there are a few key characteristics that many MLL students share. For example, compared to younger students, students age 40 and older are more likely to have spent multiple years or decades away from the classroom. It is also typical for MLL students to be juggling multiple roles and responsibilities, including full- or part-time employment and family obligations. As compared to traditional age students, MLL students are more likely to be enrolled on a part-time basis (NCES, 2018). Additionally, MLL students are more likely to be managing health issues or functional impairments. These characteristics are relevant for understanding the roles that faculty members play in MLL students' success.

Methods

This research is part of a larger mixed-methods study examining experiences and barriers to success for students 40 years of age and older enrolled in community colleges in a midwestern state. The larger study draws on existing quantitative data on students from all community colleges in the state and original qualitative data collected from each college, with more in-depth data collection at three focal colleges. This paper reports selected findings from the qualitative component of the study.

Qualitative data collection included 12 semi-structured focus groups with students ages 40+ ($n = 68$, age range of 40-73 years), three semi-structured focus groups ($n = 14$), and five individual interviews with faculty members at the three focal colleges. Student and faculty focus groups were conducted to gain a better understanding of why older students return to school, the barriers and challenges they face, programs and services that facilitate their success, and the role faculty play in supporting adult students. Questions about both positive and negative interactions with faculty were included in student focus groups, as were requests for feedback on how faculty might better support student success. Faculty focus group participants were asked questions about barriers older students face and accommodations they have made in the classroom. We also conducted 57 interviews (by telephone or face-to-face) with key informants, including at least one key informant from each of the community colleges in the state. Fifteen of the interviews were with key informants at the three focal colleges. Data collection took place between September 2016 and May 2018.

Using applied thematic analysis (Guest et al., 2011), we employed an open coding technique to identify codes and categories grounded in the data, assisted by qualitative analysis

software (ATLAS.ti). This paper reports our qualitative findings on the roles faculty play in shaping MLL students' community college experiences and outcomes.

Findings

Because MLL students have multiple demands on their time, faculty members often are their primary point of contact with the college (Cummins, et al., forthcoming), serving as front-line advisors. As one student focus group participant (Helen, age 70) noted, “the faculty [are] very important. I mean, they’re the ones you have the one-on-one with, that you are with, you know...repeatedly. ... [T]hey get to know you, you get to know them, there’s a rapport.” Cindy (age 49) described the role of faculty as the first line of support: “You usually start off with your instructor and then go from there. They can give you ideas on who to contact to get some help.” Having a “go-to” person—often a faculty member—to help navigate the college experience from enrollment to completion is especially valuable for students who are returning after an extended period away from school. As Florence (age 55) explained, “If you find one person that’s gonna be helpful and get with you on what you need to do, and not talk to you like you’re supposed to know this, then that’s the person you’ll generally deal with.”

Many faculty members play multiple roles in the lives of MLL students beyond instruction: they provide academic and career advising, serve as mentors, and help connect students to campus and community resources. A social work student (Joyce, age 49) reported that “you could go to them for anything, and they’d help you. They help you through a lot.” Faculty also fill in the gaps when services are inadequate or inaccessible, such as providing technology support after regular business hours. Several students identified faculty as the channel through which they became aware of services, such as tutoring and financial aid opportunities, although some wished that faculty were more knowledgeable about what was

available: “Educate them in what’s available so they can offer it to the student instead of the candid, ‘I don’t know. Go down and talk to...go see this person...go call this number.’ I mean, I’ve heard it all” (Charles, age 54).

Another important way in which faculty shape MLL students’ experiences is through making accommodations in class. Because MLL students frequently juggle multiple roles and sometimes are dealing with their own or a family member’s health issues, accommodations beyond those required by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) may be necessary for their success. Faculty members are uniquely positioned to exercise discretion concerning accommodations at the classroom level, and our student participants stressed how valuable these accommodations were to them:

“I feel real passionately about [this college] because, uhm, I’ve had professors that have been fabulous in terms of working with me. I was in the middle of last spring semester and my father was hospitalized for 30 days and I am not only his primary caregiver, I am his only caregiver. It’s me. The whole kit and caboodle, and I was halfway in [to the semester], so dropping the class was not an option...and I had professors that said ‘Hey, shoot this online to me. This is okay.’” (Stacey, age 50)

“I have two instructors and they both know that I possibly have cancer back, and they've already told me that, if I have to do chemo radiation, they're willing to work with me on getting my class work and stuff done.” (Cindy, age 49)

Some adjunct faculty go out of their way to make themselves accessible to students. For example, one math professor explained, “I show up an hour early and I stay late...with the students because I don’t have office hours...like the full-timers do,” but noted that this is not a perfect solution. Another adjunct faculty member explained, “There’s great joy in being able to

do that, but it also kind of wears you thin.” Underinvestment by the institution in adjunct faculty points to a failure to recognize the critical support roles that faculty play in MLL students’ college experiences.

Students also expressed gratitude for video lectures posted online by a math professor at their college, who explained that he makes his lectures available online in part to accommodate MLL students with multiple roles and responsibilities:

“They have a lot of responsibilities... That’s one of the reasons I came up with my video lectures... for them. Because when they miss class, they’re the ones that need it most.”

By working with students to accommodate life circumstances and barriers, faculty can provide the support and flexibility that are critical to many MLL students’ success.

Discussion and Implications for Policy and Practice

The ability of faculty to serve as front-line advisors is sometimes undermined by the structural realities of community college hiring practices and resource allocation. Two-thirds of community college faculty are adjuncts (i.e., part-time, contingent faculty) (NCES, 2019) who typically do not have offices on campus and are not compensated for holding office hours (Bickerstaff & Chavarín, 2018). Faculty play multiple roles in MLL students’ academic experiences, often serving as educators, mentors, and advisors, and helping students to navigate the barriers that they encounter. However, in order to sustain this work over the long term, faculty members need the support of their institutions. There are significant disparities in the support offered to adjunct faculty compared to tenure-track faculty—an issue that is especially salient for community colleges, where adjuncts make up a majority of instructors (Hurlburt & McGarrah, 2016; NCES, 2019).

Adjunct faculty rarely are provided the same opportunities for professional development or integration into the college system (Bickerstaff & Chavarín, 2018; Thirolf & Woods, 2017). For example, as compared to full-time faculty, adjunct faculty are less likely to have peer mentors, less likely to be included in departmental or institutional meetings, and less likely to have the opportunity to interact with colleagues, all of which can foster a sense of professional isolation (Bickerstaff & Chavarín, 2018; Kezar, 2013). Larger community colleges often have more resources available and are in a better position to offer adjuncts professional development than are smaller colleges (Grant & Keim, 2002).

MLL students may not have the skills or knowledge to navigate a community college bureaucracy and frequently rely on faculty to help them understand available resources (Karp, 2011). Lack of knowledge about available resources can result in students failing to persist or selecting programs of study that are a poor fit for their goals or needs (Karp, 2011; Spellman, 2007). Moreover, a majority of MLL students attend college on a part-time basis and work part-time or full-time, and therefore may be unable to seek college resources during normal business hours. Professional development that provides adjunct faculty with readily accessible information about college resources and policies would allow them to better assist students (Bickerstaff & Chavarín, 2018). Additionally, adjuncts are not typically provided with office space, which limits their ability to meet with students outside of class (Dolan et al., 2013; Thirolf & Woods, 2017). Interactions with faculty outside the classroom are associated with academic success for ethnically diverse and non-traditional age students (Barbatis, 2010; Sorey & Duggan, 2008), which can be challenging for students if the adjunct faculty member does not maintain office hours. Our findings on the critical roles faculty play in helping MLL students succeed suggest that providing additional support for all faculty in the form of professional development,

designated office spaces, and inclusion in faculty and department meetings would be a valuable investment for community colleges serving age-diverse student bodies—one that likely will yield benefits for students of all ages. In addition, increasing faculty awareness of relevant resources, such as tutoring, financial aid, mental health services, and sources of emergency funding could improve student success.

Acknowledgements

The research reported here was supported by the Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, through Grant R305A160156 to Miami University. The opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not represent views of the Institute or the U.S. Department of Education.

References

- Barbatis, P. (2010). Underprepared, ethnically diverse community college students: Factors contributing to persistence. *Journal of Developmental Education*, 33(3), 16.
<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ942872.pdf>
- Bickerstaff, S., & Chavarín, O. (2018). Understanding the Needs of Part-Time Faculty at Six Community Colleges. CCRC Research Brief. Retrieved from
<https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/publications/understanding-part-time-faculty-community-colleges.html>
- Cummins, P., McGrew, K., Arbogast, A., & Bahr, P. R. (forthcoming). *Mid- and Later-life Community College Students: "Off-time" Education and the Significance of Intracohort Diversity*.
- Dolan, D. M., Hall, M. S., Karlsson, C. R., & Martinak, M. L. (2013). Five years later: Maryland adjuncts tell us (again) who they are and what they want. *The Journal of Continuing Higher Education*, 61(1), 35-45. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ994840>
- Grant, M. R., & Keim, M. C. (2002). Faculty development in publicly supported two-year colleges. *Community College Journal of Research & Practice*, 26(10), 793-807.
doi:10.1080/10668920290104886

- Guest, G., MacQueen, K. M., & Namey, E. E. (2011) *Applied thematic analysis*. Sage Publications.
- Hurlburt, S., & McGarrah, M. (2016). *The shifting academic workforce: Where are the contingent faculty?* Washington, DC: American Institutes for Research Retrieved from https://www.deltacostproject.org/sites/default/files/products/Shifting-Academic-Workforce-November-2016_0.pdf.
- Karp, M. M. (2011). *Toward a new understanding of non-academic student support: Four mechanisms encouraging positive student outcomes in the community college*. (CCRC Working Paper No. 28). New York: Community College Research Center, Columbia University Retrieved from <https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/media/k2/attachments/new-understanding-non-academic-support.pdf>.
- Kezar, A. (2013). Examining non-tenure track faculty perceptions of how departmental policies and practices shape their performance and ability to create student learning at four-year institutions. *Research in Higher Education*, 54(5), 571-598. doi: 10.1007/s11162-013-9288-5.
- National Center of Education Statistics. (2018). *Table 303.50. Total fall enrollment in degree-granting postsecondary institutions, by level of enrollment, control and level of institution, attendance status, and age of student: 2017*. Retrieved from https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d19/tables/dt19_303.50.asp?current=yes
- National Center of Education Statistics. (2019). *Number of staff at Title IV institutions and administrative offices, by control and level of institution or administrative office, medical school staff status, occupational category, and employment status: United States, fall 2018*.

- Sorey, K. C., & Duggan, M. H. (2008). Differential predictors of persistence between community college adult and traditional-aged students. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 32(2), 75-100.
- Spellman, N. (2007). Enrollment and retention barriers adult students encounter. *The Community College Enterprise*, 13(1), 63.
- Thirolf, K. Q., & Woods, R. S. (2017). Contingent faculty at community colleges: The too-often overlooked and under-engaged faculty majority. *New Directions for Institutional Research*, 2017(176), 55-66.