

Mature Students in Community College: Two Supports To Improve Student Success

Lynn Cliplef

Abstract

Mature students are making up an increasing proportion of the student population at Canadian colleges and universities. At Assiniboine Community College (ACC), in southwestern Manitoba, an average of 360 mature students enrolled in various programs each year from 2008 to 2013. These mature students bring with them unique strengths and challenges. The purpose of this paper, after defining the term “mature student,” is to describe the barriers that mature students face in returning to college or university, to elaborate the importance of mature student success for themselves and their families, and to propose orientation and professional development programs at ACC in order to help the mature students of Assiniboine Community College to be successful.

A significant number of mature students attend Assiniboine Community College (ACC) in southwestern Manitoba. These students are returning to school for a variety of reasons, for example, after working, serving in the army, or parenting for some amount of time. Because of their varying life experiences, mature students often have needs and expectations that are different from those of traditionally aged students and, thus, their college experiences are also likely going to be different. Mature students often do not have the same amount of time to commit to the entire “student experience,” because they are balancing their lives as students with outside responsibilities such as parenting, earning an income, and caring for aging parents. It is important to note that mature students, like any students, are individuals who do not all have the same characteristics or needs as learners. O’Shea and Stone (2011) remarked on this diversity, “When family commitments, employment status, past education experience and full- or part-time enrolment are considered, some idea of the melting pot of the mature-age student experience becomes apparent” (p. 275). Similarly, Fragoso et al. (2013) cautioned against viewing mature students as a homogenous group, because of their wide range of individual commitments and responsibilities outside of being students. In this paper, I describe the challenges that may face these mature students and propose supports that could be put in place in order to help these students to succeed.

There are differing definitions of mature students. Tones, Fraser, Elder, and White (2009) stated that 25 years old is a logical cut-off point because of “the significant difference in life circumstances between students aged less than 25 years . . . and mature-aged students” (p. 506). Fragoso et al. (2013) noted that mature students are often characterized by their inability to predominantly prioritize their academic life, but instead must make room for their studies among other responsibilities such as career, family, and personal factors. ACC defines mature students as those students who are over 25 at the beginning of their studies.

Because mature students often face barriers that differ from their younger, traditionally aged classmates, it is important for ACC to understand and meet the needs of these students. In this paper, I explore the following: the barriers that mature students face in their return to education, the concepts of self-investment and perseverance, and the implications of the success of these students for themselves, the college, and their communities. With this focus in mind, I then propose orientation and professional development programs that will help the college to meet the needs of these students and assist the students to transition successfully into their academic studies.

Barriers for Mature Students

Upon returning to formal education, mature students often face various barriers that make it more difficult for them to make the transition to the role of the student. Petty and Thomas (2014) categorized these barriers as situational, dispositional, and institutional. Situational barriers are factors within their lives over which mature students may have little control, including childcare, finances, and legal difficulties. The term *dispositional barriers* refers to the barriers created by the students' own attitudes about learning, their level of self-confidence, and their resiliency. Institutional barriers can include difficult course material, class locations that can be difficult to find or get to, and institutional attendance policies.

Many mature students must overcome situational barriers in order to be successful in their academic studies. In order to overcome these external barriers, students must balance different aspects of their lives, including studying, working, and fulfilling family commitments (Fragoso et al., 2014; Petty & Thomas, 2014). Erisman and Steele (2012) found that the most significant barrier to adults returning to school was competing priorities. For example, because mature students often have to continue to earn a living for their families while returning to school, the students are forced to prioritize their time among their work, their families, and their schooling responsibilities. For students who are parents, this transition can be even more difficult because the students' children also have to adapt to their parents' new schedules (Fragoso et al., 2014). During the transition to academic life, the students' children may have an increased need for parental support and affirmation, and because parents returning to study have less time to spend with their children, this need can lead to an increase in parental stress and guilt.

These feelings of guilt have been found to be common in female students. Fragoso et al. (2014) found that students struggling with balancing work, family, and study reflected that they often have feelings of guilt. Study participants expressed feelings of guilt for being a burden to those supporting them and for prioritizing, at least seemingly in their minds, their education before their families. Participants reflected that they had to learn to let go of the idea that they could "do it all" in order to transition successfully into the role of the student. In order to be successful in their return to school, female students need to remember their motivations, including wanting to create a better life for their families, and put aside the guilt over prioritizing their studies.

In order to be successful, many mature students must overcome internal, dispositional barriers in order to transition to being successful students. In a survey conducted by Erisman and Steele (2012), more than half of respondents reported that the fear of failure was a significant barrier to their return to education. Mature-aged students who are returning to education sometimes lack the qualifications of their traditionally aged peers and, additionally, some do not have positive memories of formal education (Anderson, Johnston, & McDonald, 2014). Students who lack traditional qualifications may feel like they do not deserve to be there, creating lowered self-esteem. As well, having to attend classes with much younger peers can add to the psychological barriers faced by mature students (Erisman & Steele, 2012).

Mature students must also overcome institutional barriers in order to become successful students. Erisman and Steele (2012) found that many students cited bureaucratic barriers such as financial holds, difficulties with transfer credits, and receiving conflicting advice from different departments.

Mature students may face many barriers when returning to their education, and each student is unique in his/her history and the challenges that he/she has faced. Administrators, instructors, and counsellors of adult education programs should be aware of these barriers and assist mature-aged students as much as possible in overcoming them (Petty & Thomas, 2014).

Self-Investment and Perseverance

One way to overcome the barriers that mature students face is for them to learn to understand and appreciate their own value, in order to use their own strength to maintain motivation and perseverance. Petty and Thomas (2014) found that students use motivation to overcome barriers to their participation in education. One study reviewed by Petty and Thomas found that many adult learners begin their studies with the motivation to be successful students, but as they proceed through their studies barriers to their education can act to de-motivate them. It stands to reason that creating an environment in which individuals can excel helps to maintain the high level of motivation for learning with which they began their studies. While not all students are motivated by the same things, it has been found that appropriately challenging tasks, good instruction, continuous success, and peer recognition in the classroom can combine to maintain motivation in students.

In order to overcome barriers to their education, students must rely on perseverance to maintain their motivation. One source of perseverance for students is self-investment (Vaccaro & Lovell, 2010). Vaccaro and Lovell (2010) defined self-investment as understanding one's own value enough to believe that "personal growth, learning, and education [are] needed and deserved" (p. 173). They stated that if a woman experiences self-investment, she will persevere in her education even with outside forces such as family and work pulling her away. This self-investment encourages mature students to see the value of education to them outside of just getting a better career; they see the education as a way of improving themselves and achieving success.

The Importance of Success for Mature Students

For many mature students, the positive effect of returning to school reaches far beyond a different job or promotion. In Fragoso et al.'s (2013) study, students stated that the positive effects that their new education had on their lives far outweighed the hardships and barriers that they faced during their transitions to student life. Indeed, a return to formal education can change more in mature students' lives than their job prospects. O'Shea and Stone (2011) found that returning to education can improve all aspects of mature students' lives, from feeling more confident – "I feel like, all of a sudden, I've got a brain . . . My opinion is worthy" (p. 282), to a feeling of well-being – "Feeling fulfilled, completely filled the void" (p. 283).

Returning to education can also change how mature students view knowledge and learning. In Fragoso et al.'s (2014) study, students reported developing an intrinsic love of learning and knowledge, said that they were glad to have broadened their horizons, and reported a sense of pride for taking ownership of their future and making changes to their lives. By overcoming the barriers that they faced and by engaging in their education, the mature students in the aforementioned studies were able to grow in all aspects of their lives.

By returning to school, mature students improve not just their own lives; they also improve the lives of their whole families and their communities. Vaccaro and Lovell (2010) reported that for some students, there is a link between being good students and feeling successful as mothers. In O'Shea and Stone's (2011) study, students spoke of becoming role models for their children: "With them watching me read all the time, they're kind of improving themselves at school" (p. 284). By watching a parent go to school, students learn to see themselves as post-secondary students one day. One of the study participants stated that returning to school was the start of a positive cycle for the family: "I've now started a new cycle and my children can start too. . . . It's like breaking a vicious cycle" (O'Shea & Stone, 2011, p. 284). By returning to school, mature students become role models in their children's education.

While mature students have barriers for their study that are different from those of their traditionally aged counterparts, by overcoming these barriers students can change the lives of both themselves and their families. Because of all the advantages to students, their families,

and their community, it is important for ACC to work with and assist mature students to succeed in their programs and to meet their goals.

Mature Student Orientation

One way that ACC could better meet the needs of mature students would be by creating an orientation program specific to their needs. Petty and Thomas (2014) found that orientation programs that include details about program expectations, relationship-building activities between staff and students, and goal-setting exercises are important to the success of mature-aged learners. ACC's orientation sessions would help students to prepare for their studies by providing instruction on study and on information technology (IT) and computer skills, informing students of student services available to them on campus, counselling the students on school-life balance, guiding the students through a goal-setting session, inviting the families of the students onto campus, and giving mature students the opportunity to network. Petty and Thomas (2014) found that mature students often drop out of adult education programs in the first few weeks, and that orientation programs can help students to understand the expectations and program procedures and ensure that the students feel welcomed to the program.

The orientation program would ideally include some instruction on study skills. The participants in Frago et al.'s (2014) study identified the need to overcome a lack of self-confidence in their academic skills. Instructing students on academic and study skills such as how to take notes, read textbooks, manage their time, write papers, and study for tests would assist students to feel more confident as they begin their studies. In another study by Anderson et al. (2012), most mature students reported using only the rudimentary study technique of reading over assigned reading and lecture notes repeatedly. Instructing students in various study strategies encourages students to choose an effective strategy for the type of material that they are learning and the assessment for which they are preparing. Anderson et al. found that instructing students in study skills, which fosters a deeper understanding of course material, acts as a scaffold to encourage a more sophisticated and satisfying learning experience. By learning study skills before they enter the classroom, mature students gain confidence in their academic skills, because they are able to choose appropriate and effective study strategies for each situation.

Another area of instruction that would be included in the orientation program is IT and computer use skills. Tones, Fraser, Elder, and Whitle (2009) found that older mature-aged students (over 45) and students with a low socio-economic status are likely to have difficulties with computer skills. Students could have a short tutorial session on basic computer tasks that are essential for class participation. Students would have a chance to sign into the computers, learn to use their college e-mail so they can remain up to date on campus events, and print class notes. For example, the mature students could be shown how to print power-point slides six to a page, so that they do not use their entire printing budget when they print the notes for the first week of class. By receiving some computer skill and IT instruction in the orientation program, mature students would not have that extra cause of stress during the already busy first few weeks of class.

An important aspect of the orientation program would be to introduce the student services that are available to the students at the college. Frago et al. (2014) found that mature students may need more support during the transition to the role of the student. While services that support students during this transition may exist, students need to be told about them. Tones et al. (2009) found that many of the students in their survey did not know about the services that could support them during this transition. Likewise, mature students at ACC may very well not know about all the services available to them or how to access them. Because ACC currently has multiple campuses, students may not be aware of the services based out of the rural campuses, and this session would help to ensure that students are aware of all programming on all campuses. It would be a beneficial component of the orientation program to

ensure that mature students know what supports exist and how to access them when they need them.

The mature student orientation program could also include counselling sessions on how to achieve a successful work-life balance. Anderson et al. (2012) found that students expressed difficulty with balancing work demands, family commitments, and school responsibilities. This balance is often difficult; one study found that students had given up sleep and personal hobbies in order to be successful in their studies (Vaccaro & Lovell, 2010). Many students need to access the assistance of family members or others in order to balance their responsibilities and complete their studies. Receiving this assistance can be difficult; many of the women in Filippioni-Berardinelli's (2013) study expressed guilt for using supports, because of the social expectations put on women to maintain traditional roles of housekeeper and primary caregiver. Some of the participants expressed feelings of guilt for being a burden to those supporting them and for seemingly, in their minds, prioritizing their education before their families. Students, especially female students, must realize that it is not possible for them "to do it all," and that attempting to do so and not using available supports will increase their stress levels. Counselling students on ways to manage the difficult work-life balance, and encouraging them to use supports if they need them, may help students with busy family lives make the transition to being students. Women re-entry students must have an opportunity to engage in conversation about the perceived barriers to seeking the supports that they need in order to succeed academically (Filippioni-Berardinelli). This counseling session could also include information on time-management and would encourage students to take time to look after themselves in order to help the students make a successful transition to being students.

The orientation sessions could also include a session on career counselling and goal setting. Petty and Thomas (2014) found that mature-aged students who had received career counselling as part of their return to school had greater job satisfaction and achievement after completion than those who were not counselled. These career counselling sessions can help students keep their vocational goals in mind and set specific academic goals that will help them to meet their vocational goals. Petty and Thomas found that adult students who set specific goals were more likely to remain motivated and to overcome barriers than students without clear goals. Institutions should therefore guide students to set goals and to monitor their own progress by helping them to develop self-reflective skills. These goal-setting workshops should include modelling or instruction on how to create motivating short-term, medium-term, and long-term goals while ensuring that the goals are specific and measurable. It is also important to help students evaluate their progress toward their goals, because this helps them to learn how to self-evaluate and to recognize and celebrate their own progress toward their goals.

An important component of the mature student orientation session would be to invite the families of the mature students to campus. In Vaccaro and Lovell's (2010) study, many of the women spoke of their families as sources of inspiration and support. When students' families are invited to campus, the entire family has an opportunity to make a connection with the campus, which may become an even greater motivating factor to the mature students.

An orientation program specifically for mature students would also have the advantage of giving students the opportunity to network with other mature students. In the study by Fragoso et al. (2014), participants cited relationships with peers as an important factor in successfully navigating the transition associated with returning to school. The connections with other mature students may serve to help students navigate the transition back into the academic world.

The transition to the role of a student can be difficult, but a well-planned orientation program could assist students in this transition. Orientation sessions give students information, resources, and contacts that help them to make the transition easier. By holding an orientation session for mature students, ACC would put these motivated students in the best position to start their education in the best frame of mind.

Instructor Professional Development

My second proposition is that ACC could provide professional development to instructional staff so as to improve their understanding of the mature adult learners' experiences and what they, as instructors, can do to help these students to be successful. Many of the studies that Petty and Thomas (2014) reviewed found that the instructors were an important factor in a successful adult education program. Petty and Thomas found that mature students are inspired to learn when instructors are "friendly, helpful, knowledgeable, and respectful of adult students," and when instruction is focused on the needs of the students (p. 476). The following topics should be included in a professional development program aimed at helping mature students: empathizing with the barriers which mature students must overcome, giving effective feedback, communicating clear expectations, building community, and helping students to use motivation in order to be persistent and continue their schooling in spite of barriers. Because instructors play a key role in the mature student experience, it is important to support instructors so that they can best meet the needs of these students.

When working with mature students, it is important for instructors to have empathy for the barriers that mature students must overcome in their transition to the role of the student. Petty and Thomas (2014) stated that in order to reach mature students, instructors must have an understanding of the negative past experiences that mature-aged students may bring with them to the classroom. During professional development, instructors can learn and dialogue about the barriers faced by mature students in returning to studies, and the effect of negative experiences that many mature students have in their histories. Filipponi-Berardinelli (2013) affirmed that institutions could help female re-entry students by ensuring that faculty members have an understanding of the "cultural and systematic factors that affect non-traditional students – especially women re-entry students" ("Significance," para. 2). When educated on both the difficult transition that mature students face, and their balancing act, instructors may make decisions with a more complete understanding of the students' situations.

Another important topic for the professional development program is how to give helpful feedback. Fragoso et al. (2014) noted the difficulty that some mature students had in adjusting to being evaluated and receiving feedback. Instructors must learn how to give feedback that fosters growth and learning in the students. Instructors can encourage learning by including supportive and encouraging feedback, because this helps students to see feedback as an opportunity to learn (Tett, Hounsell, Christie, Cree, & McCune, 2012). Comments should be specific and encouraging in order to improve motivation and persistence in students. Another identified characteristic of good feedback is that it should be easy for the student to understand and should include an explanation for corrections. Finally, comments that are based on skills development, rather than on specific content, are most useful to students on assessments, because skills development is transferable. Assessment is a major part of students' educational experiences and it can play an important role in student success (Tett et al., 2012). Because of the importance of assessment to student success and mature students' fear of assessment and feedback, it is important that instructors know the characteristics of good feedback and understand how to give feedback with the purpose of improving student learning.

The importance of clear expectations must be included in the staff professional development program. Tones et al. (2009) found that many mature and low socio-economic status students reported not understanding the instructors' expectations, especially in terms of writing assignments. Mature-aged students from low socio-economic backgrounds stated that staff awareness training would be both relevant and helpful for them, because they tend to be unsure about the expectations of university study. Instructors should learn how to ensure that students understand the expectations for assigned work so that figuring out expectations is not a source of additional stress for students as they return to academic life.

Building a learning community should be also included in the instructor professional development program. Kahu, Stephens, Leach, and Zepke (2013) found that the most important

factor for predicting student learning was a supportive learning environment. Instructors are in the position to encourage the formation of a positive and supporting community formation. The mature students in Fragoso et al.'s (2014) study noted that a more interactive style in the classroom led to a stronger learning community outside the classroom. In order for cooperative learning to be effective, instructors must be purposeful about the addition of cooperative learning in the classroom, and students must see the value in working with and from each other. In the study by Anderson et al. (2012), most of the students viewed peer interaction and group learning as having questionable value in helping them to learn. The students' dislike for peer interaction seemed to come from different sources: viewing their peers' knowledge as being less valid than that of the tutor or lecturer, lacking confidence in their own knowledge, and perhaps being unable to address the practical difficulties of group work due to the nature of a part-time program. Instructors must understand students' possible aversions to group work and ensure that scaffolding is in place to assist students in their group work and in their adjustment to a new learning style. For example, in initial group work, students can be given very specific roles within the group, because this approach gives structure to the group work.

It would also be beneficial for instructors to understand the connection between mature student motivation, and persistence and retention in education. Petty and Thomas (2014) found that students use motivation to overcome barriers to their participation in education. It has been found that students are motivated by appropriately challenging tasks, good instruction, success, and recognition. Instructors can therefore plan their instruction to help students stay motivated in their education even when barriers to their study may act to de-motivate them.

By receiving professional development targeted at assisting mature students to be successful, instructors will be more equipped to help mature students maintain their motivation and be successful in their studies. One thing to note about the professional development program described here is that if instructors integrate empathy, helpful feedback, clear expectations, and community building in their classrooms, they help not only the mature students but all students in the classroom, whether mature or younger traditionally aged students.

Conclusion

Because of their already full lives, mature students often have barriers to their returning to education that are not encountered by traditionally aged, younger students. These mature students must be encouraged to understand their own value and see education as self-investment, in order to maintain motivation to overcome these barriers and be successful in their schooling. Success for these students goes beyond just getting a better job, because it can be the beginning of an "upward spiral" for the entire family. The addition of an orientation program that is tailored to meet the needs of these mature students will help them to start their education in a good way, feeling prepared. As well, ensuring that instructors know the barriers that mature students face, and how to assist students to overcome these barriers, will make the transition to the role of the student as smooth as possible.

Mature students make up a significant part of the ACC student population; therefore, it is important for the college to meet their needs as students. A targeted orientation program would help these students to overcome some of the barriers that they face as they return to school. As well, it would ensure that students are aware of the supports that already exist on campus if they need to use them at a later time. ACC is committed to the retention of students, and an orientation program targeted for mature students – those who are at a higher risk of dropping out because of the barriers faced – would help them to maintain motivation and to be successful in the program.

For students, instructors are the face of the college. Having instructors who are understanding and empathetic to the struggles faced by mature students as they overcome the barriers associated with their return to college will help students to maintain motivation and to

persist. As well, instructors who are knowledgeable in providing feedback that encourages learning and growth will help students to be successful and continue in their programs.

By implementing orientation and professional development programs tailored toward mature students, ACC will assist these students in overcoming their unique challenges in returning to school. These mature students will be able to maintain their motivation and be successful in their programs. This success will change not only their lives, but also the lives of their entire families and the communities in which they live.

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About the Author

Lynn Cliplef has been an instructor of math and science in the School of Trades and Technology at Assiniboine Community College in Brandon, Manitoba, since 2010. She has a Bachelor of Mathematics from the University of Waterloo, a Bachelor of Education from Brandon University, and is currently working on a Master of Education in educational administration at Brandon University.