

Adult Re-Entry Students: Experiences Preceding Entry into a Rural Appalachian Community College

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[Return to Contents Page](#)

Abstract

This study examines the reasons adult re-entry students are entering colleges in dramatic numbers and offers insights into the special demands on and needs of this population.

Colleges across the United States are noticing a trend that is likely to continue: an increasing number of adults who choose to re-enter education. It is important to gain a better understanding of the variables involved in this phenomenon (Haggan, 2000).

According to research conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics (2003) in 1995 and 1996, approximately three million undergraduates enrolled in postsecondary education for the first time and approximately 46 percent of those undergraduates enrolled in a public two-year college. Statistics from *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (Evangelou, 2004) revealed that nearly six million students (first-time and returning) entered the nation's community colleges in the fall of 2001. The National Center for Education Statistics (2002) reported that over 42 percent of students re-entering education in the United States were age 24 or older. Additionally, the American Association of Community Colleges (2000) reported that in the year 2000, 47 percent of re-entering students in the nation's community colleges were 25 or older. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2002) profiled 1999-2000 undergraduates and found that "older undergraduates, who are more likely to have family and work responsibilities, are concentrated in public, two-year colleges . . . and they are very likely to attend on a part-time basis" (p. vi).

Why is there such a dramatic increase in the enrollment of these students? The decision to enter higher education as an adult learner is often predicated and motivated by life transitions (Aslanian, 1989; Brookfield, 1992; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999; Schlossberg, 1984). Kasworm, Polson, and Fishback (2002) pointed out, "Participation studies clearly show that for adults, life transitions or employment-related issues often influence their decisions" (p. 117). Aslanian (2001) found that career changes preceded college entrance for half of students from ages 26 to 59 enrolled in community college credit courses. Additionally, 23 percent of the students in Aslanian's (2001) study reported a major life transition as the impetus for college entrance.

At Community Colleges

Community colleges attract a myriad of students, but certain similarities exist among students who choose the community college (Cohen & Brawer, 1996; Phillippe & Valiga, 2000; Vaughan, 1995). According to Bryant (2000), the community college allows a student who has financial constraints to pursue an academic opportunity, so the community college is often a second chance for students, especially those who are considered to be re-entry. Clarke also (2001) included "second chance" and "fresh start" as reasons that females returned to the community college. As a result, some community colleges offer special programs for specific groups such as displaced workers, including job seminars and on-the-job training (Sherman, 1989). Bundy (2004) further described, "Historically, community colleges have played an important role in providing affordable and convenient education as well as alternative courses to students who were considered nontraditional" (p. 3). Hagedorn (2005) added further definition of the nontraditional student by describing enrollment patterns and program selections:

Nontraditional students often enroll in programs that are easily accessible, that have relatively flexible course schedules, and are supportive of adult commitments. Such students tend to seek out more flexible programs and are more likely to enroll in distance education than are other students. (p. 25)

Zhai and Monzon (2004) conducted research on retention issues of community college students. The researchers focused on students who withdrew either before or during the semester or those who did not return the following semester (nonpersisters). The results for all groups indicated that the reasons for attrition were varied; however, there were several salient factors that influenced the decision to leave college: conflict with work schedules, family obligations, financial problems,

campus parking, and personal problems. Zhai and Monzon iterated:

Community college students are more diverse than university students, particularly in terms of employment status. Consequently, when community college students do decide to leave, regardless of timing of leaving, it is primarily the result of the students' struggle to maintain a balance between the academic and social demands of the campus and the responsibilities of off-campus life (e.g., work and family). (p. 12)

The Case of Mountain Empire Community College

Mountain Empire Community College (MECC)'s service region covers the extreme southwestern corner of Virginia and includes four counties and one city: Dickenson, Lee, Scott, and Wise Counties, and the city of Norton. With a service region population of 93,000 residents, MECC currently serves over 5,000 students annually (Mountain Empire Community College, 2005).

Like most community college students, a majority of MECC students bring challenges that may impede their academic success. Many are first-generation students for whom higher education is a new experience. Additionally, many are functioning within multiple roles of work, family, community, and school. According to Haggan (2000), community college students are apt to be economically disadvantaged and underprepared; they are likely to be from ethnic backgrounds traditionally underrepresented in college and university settings; they tend to be older than traditional students; and they are more likely to be female, first-generation, and attending college part-time.

This qualitative study sought to gain knowledge about the life transitions and experiences of college re-entry students at MECC, so the researcher explored the types of life transitions of adult learners and examined how these experiences impacted re-entry students at MECC. Research questions included the following:

- What life transition(s) precede the adult re-entry student's entrance into the community college?
- What barriers or obstacles do adult re-entry students face (institutional, personal, or both)?
- What services and resources provided by the college were of greatest benefit to the re-entry student?
- How can the community college better provide support services to facilitate the transition process of adult re-entry students?
- Is the transition experience of recent graduates different from the transition experience of currently enrolled students?

Design of Study

Qualitative research techniques, particularly the phenomenological approach, were used in this study. Purposeful sampling, a dominant strategy in qualitative inquiry, was employed and guided by a criterion of the participants who were adult re-entry students of ages 25 or older and who entered MECC after having been separated from an educational setting for at least five years. Prior education may have been high school or an attempt in higher education. Participants were currently enrolled students in either an associate's degree or certificate program or individuals who graduated from an associate's degree or certificate program at MECC from May 2004 to May 2005.

Research Participants

Pseudonyms were assigned to subjects to protect their identity. Participants were required to document their agreement to participate by signing an informed consent document. Face-to-face, phenomenological interviews with adult re-entry students were used for the data collection of this study. Open-ended interview questions in the form of an interview guide were completed for the qualitative interviewing process. All of the interviews were tape recorded for transcription, and the final transcription was verbatim (using the exact words of the respondents and any lingo or repetitions the interviewee may have included).

Data Collection

Twenty-four in-depth interviews were conducted with adult re-entry students and recent graduates at the college. After the interviews were tape recorded and the material transcribed, these were analyzed for themes. Also, a demographic information sheet was completed for each participant at the time of the interview.

Twenty-one of the participants were enrolled at the college and three were recent graduates. Of these, fifteen were female and nine male, ranging in age from 30 to 56. Prior to enrollment at MECC, participants had been disconnected from classroom education from 10 to 30 years. In terms of previous education, the data were as follows:

- ten participants had high school diplomas only,
- three participants a General Educational Development (GED) diploma,
- four some college experience (without certificate or degree completion),
- three with one-year certification,
- two with a two-year technical or transfer degree,
- one with a bachelor's degree, and
- one with a master's degree.

The data also encompassed family and marital status. Of those interviewed, sixteen were married, three single, three divorced, and two separated. In addition, sixteen participants were married with children, two were separated with children, one was divorced with children, one was single with children, two were divorced with no children, and two were single with no children.

In terms of work, four participants were employed full-time, ten were employed part-time, and ten were not employed. (See data in Table 1.)

Table 1: Demographic Information for Adult Re-Entry Student Participants

Name	Age	Gender	Marital Status	# Years since education	Employed	# of Children <18	# of Children >18
Harvey	43	Male	Single	21	No	0	0
Steve	54	Male	Separated	14	No	1	2
Andrew	47	Male	Single	28	Full-time	0	0
Paul	48	Male	Married	29	Part-time	1	0
Katie	46	Female	Married	25	No	1	1
Penelope	49	Female	Divorced	23	No	0	0
Conley	35	Male	Married	10	Full-time	1	0
Bill	55	Male	Married	10	No	0	2
Mandy	40	Female	Married	18	Part-time	2	1
Tim	41	Male	Married	20	Part-time	2	0
Rick	44	Male	Married	25	Part-time	0	2
Grace	56	Female	Divorced	11	Part-time	0	0
Rebecca	38	Female	Separated	14	Part-time	2	1
Katlin	30	Female	Married	12	No	2	0
Marie	39	Female	Married	23	Part-time	1	0
Lucy	38	Female	Divorced	19	Part-time	1	0
Roy	43	Male	Married	26	No	0	1
Deanna	50	Female	Married	30	No	0	1
Danielle	56	Female	Married	30	Part-time	0	3
Jane	43	Female	Married	24	No	1	0
*Gail	43	Female	Married	21	Full-time	0	2
*Megan	40	Female	Married	17	No	3	0
*Maggie	45	Female	Married	16	Part-time	1	1
*Michelle	46	Female	Single	21	Full-time	1	0

*denotes graduates

Data Analysis

Information gathered through the phenomenological interviews was analyzed both interpretively and inductively as recommended by both Merriam (2002) and Miles and Huberman (1994). The naturalistic inquiry research paradigm uses inductive analysis as one of the study's characteristics (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 1990). Patton defined inductive analysis as "the patterns, themes, and categories of analysis [that] come from the data; they emerge out of the data rather than being imposed on them prior to data collection" (p. 390). A coding process described by Creswell (2003) was used to organize and describe the data gathered in the interviews. Qualitative inquiry requires that data analysis be dynamic – a process that begins and evolves as the data suggests information and themes emerge. Transcribed notes were used to identify common themes and coding was an ongoing process used during this research with re-entry students.

Results from Student Interviews

Listed in order of interview question, the researcher drew conclusions, implications for further research, and recommendations for practice.

Research Question 1: What life transition(s) precede the adult re-entry student's entrance into the community college?

Participants were asked to describe the events in their lives the year before entering MECC. All twenty-four participants reported a life transition as the catalyst for considering the return to college. In the words of Schlossberg, Lynch, and Chickering (1989), a life transition is defined as either an event such as job loss or a nonevent such as timing that changes "roles, relationships, routines, and assumptions" (p. 14). Further, Aslanian and Brickell (1980) cited job loss and or career change as the life transition that most often motivates adults to return to education.

For the participants in the study, the transition event was divided equally between job loss and a personal sense of it being the time to do so. For twelve participants for whom job loss was a triggering event, nine had already lost a job and three faced an impending layoff.

Timing affected the transition event for the remaining twelve participants. Participants reported feelings related to maturity ("It's time to grow up"), closure ("I need to finish college"), and the fulfillment of dreams ("It was time to do something for me").

Research Question 2: What barriers or obstacles do adult re-entry students face (institutional, personal, or both)?

Cross (1981) presented a typology of barriers typically encountered by the adult returning to education. These included situational barriers (money issues, family demands, life transitions), institutional barriers (institutional policies and procedures that affect the adult student such as course scheduling and accessible academic programs), dispositional barriers (self-perceptions and internal attitudes regarding the self in the educational process and as learner, and information barriers (lack of information about programs and services to assist adult students or overabundance of information irrelevant to the adult student). MECC participants reported all four types of barriers described by Cross as they entered and navigated the educational process.

Situational barriers were evident in the multiple role and time demands. Tinto (1993) described the multiple time/role demands for the re-entry student as "doing college in addition to many other things" (p. 187), stressing that adult students are often married, employed, have children, and commute to college. The profile of the MECC returning student was strikingly similar. Of the participants, sixteen were married and twenty had children. Of those children, fourteen were under the age of 18. Also, eleven participants were employed, and as MECC is nonresidential, all participants were commuters.

Dispositional barriers included feeling out of place in the educational environment, apprehension over returning to school as an older student, and overcoming anxiety about succeeding academically as a re-entry student. Informational barriers were described by the participants in terms of course scheduling conflicts, limited course offerings, and problems with college processes (financial aid and enrollment services).

Research Question 3: What services and resources provided by the college were of greatest benefit to the re-entry student? The participants cited the college itself as a resource in providing opportunities for affiliation. They further described their reasons for choosing MECC, which were categorized as accessibility, availability of desired courses/programs, and supportive instructors and staff.

Hagedorn (2005) defined returning students by describing their needs based on enrollment patterns and program selection:

Nontraditional students often enroll in programs that are easily accessible, that have relatively flexible course

schedules, and are supportive of adult commitments. Such students tend to seek out more flexible programs and are more likely to enroll in distance education than are other students. (p. 25)

Nine of the research participants indicated that their decision to attend MECC was based on financial and geographic factors. The college offered financial aid and low tuition as well as being "close to home" and a place where friends and family attended. The readily available support of financial aid was particularly relevant given that, according to Kasworm et al. (2002), "Adult students report that their highest issue and most stressful concern is their financial frugality in supporting college attendance" (p. 9).

Five participants reported that the college offered specific courses and/or programs that met their needs and goals. Eleven participants expressed positive rapport with instructors and staff.

Research Question 4: How can the community college better provide support services to facilitate the transition process of adult re-entry students? Five interviewees suggested programs of various types that the college should consider as ways to help returning students. These programs varied from a special type of orientation to a program to assist re-entry students with the stress and adjustment of returning to the classroom. Research by Kasworm et al. (2002) indicated that orientation programs designed with adult returning students in mind are essential, as well as continued contact and support. Intensive and effective orientation programs provide both. The efficacy of these programs depended on constant monitoring to assure that the needs of the adult students are being met. Peer assistance can be especially helpful in facilitating acclimation to the higher education environment. Kasworm et al. described, "Recently returned adults who have successfully navigated academic waters are more likely to understand adults' concerns and build confidence than are younger peers" (p. 129).

Five participants suggested the need for information that was relevant to the real world and to their accrued life experiences. Four respondents noted that childcare services would not only make the transition into college easier but also help with retention.

Research Question 5: Is the transition experience of recent graduates different from the transition experience of currently enrolled students? Four of the twenty-four research participants were recent graduates. Their interview responses did not indicate any differences in their transition experience when compared to those of currently enrolled students.

Conclusions

There are several conclusions that can be drawn based on the five research questions posed in the study. Similar to research by Aslanian (1989), Kasworm et al. (2002), and Schlossberg (1984), a common theme in the decision for adults to return to higher education was the experience of a life transition especially that of job displacement. The transition to college can be wrought with apprehension. 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. After a period, the participants found those fears unfounded.

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.

In order to facilitate the success of the re-entry student, colleges must address the programs and services that will best serve this population. 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. They also indicated that childcare services should be provided so that access to education was not restricted because of having small children or having to stay home with children when the county schools were closed for inclement weather.

The research participants in this study were very generous and forthcoming with the information they shared. Although they were busy with deadlines, personal and school schedules, and other time commitments, they were eager to help me as a fellow adult student. One thing that surprised me was just how much they were doing in addition to going to college. Many related having far more responsibilities than work, school, and family. Family responsibilities often included parents and extended family as well as children. A few participants worked more than one job and assisted extended family with household chores. Some were still involved in civic and community events, and most were active in church. Several related that school was something they should have done a long time ago; at the same time, they admitted that it would not have been as rich an experience if it had come at another time. Although the opportunity to return to education did not come at the most opportune time for all participants, their enthusiastic consensus was, "Go for it!"

Recommendations

First of all, a quantitative study involving a survey with a larger sample of adult re-entry students might provide a more in-depth look at the similarities and differences among the re-entry college population. The factors that affect the re-entry student population could be discovered through a qualitative approach such as research interviews or focus groups. Consequently, those factors could be used in a quantitative study in a one-way analysis of variance or a multivariate analysis of variance in order to learn more about which factors yield significant interactions. Research questions could address the following:

- Does the type of transition affect academic success (academic success operationally defined as a grade point average of 2.0 or better) for adult students?
- Does course load (full-time versus part-time) affect academic success for adult students?
- Do adult students who report more campus interactions and contacts perform better academically than those who report fewer interactions?

Secondly, a study using focus groups with larger numbers of recent graduates could provide insight into re-entry students' experiences after completion of an academic program. It was difficult to find recent graduates who were willing to be research participants for this study. The typical reasons were that contact information was no longer current, time did not allow an opportunity to come to the campus for an interview, and graduates felt reticent about participating in the project. One way to reach the population of graduates might be to conduct the research at the time students apply for graduation, thus capturing the research sample before they actually leave the college. The questions used for the focus groups could be very similar to the interview protocol used in this study and could include the following:

- What were the reasons or circumstances that brought you to college?
- What obstacles have you encountered while attending college?
- What is one thing about the college experience that has surprised you the most?
- If you knew someone was considering returning to college, what would you tell them?

Third, a study involving re-entry students from multiple community colleges from around the southwestern Virginia region (Southwest Virginia in Richlands, Virginia Highlands in Abingdon, Wytheville in Wytheville, and MECC) would allow a comparison of issues and concerns of this population. Research participants could include equal numbers of students from the occupational technical programs and the transfer programs.

Lastly, a study with the re-entry students at a local four-year institution such as the University of Virginia's College at Wise could provide a comparison of their needs and the needs of re-entry students at the two-year community college. A study of this kind could further highlight relationships and differences between the experiences of the community college re-entry student and the university re-entry student.

In Practice

An orientation class specifically designed to attract and meet the needs of adult re-entry students at the community college level should be implemented. Adult re-entry students could self-select and enroll in the course. The philosophy and mission of an adult orientation program could include the following:

- providing an orientation experience commensurate with the developmental and transition needs of adult returning students;
- fostering an atmosphere of accessibility, sensitivity to student issues, and tools for academic success; and
- facilitating a learning community of faculty and students as lifelong learners.

The goals for this orientation could include identification of the characteristics of the adult re-entry student (strengths, weaknesses, developmental issues, and transition issues); the establishment of campus networks for this population; provision of academic success information; and general campus information. Campus-wide involvement could include the offices of student services, enrollment services, federal TRIO programs, division deans, and other adult re-entry students to act as peer mentors.

Course topics for the adult re-entry student orientation class should include areas pertinent to their needs. A course outline could include these topics:

- *What's Next?* – an introduction to course, identity of adult learners, and dealing with transitions;

- *Too Many Hats!* – a class period devoted to addressing the multiple roles of adult learners with guidelines for effective coping, stress management, and use of available resources;
- *Time Zone* – time management strategies for busy adult learners;
- *The Name of the Game* – an informational session for learning about campus resources; and
- *What Would You Say?* – a class period on developing communication and assertiveness skills.

Marketing the orientation class for adult re-entry students could include information sharing at faculty inservice as well as promotions in course schedules, the campus newsletters, local newspapers, and community centers.

A second practice would be a comprehensive, developmentally-based childcare service facility located on the college campus, which would help adult students with children. Not only would it open the college's doors to students with small children, it would also help prevent students from missing classes when children are home (i.e., when inclement weather closes public schools) by offering a childcare option on campus. Students completing the childcare provider certificate program at the college could complete practicum/internship hours in the childcare center.

Additionally, training sessions or workshops to assist faculty in understanding the needs of re-entry students could be a part of professional development opportunities. This could be accomplished during inservice concurrent sessions that occur each January and August, on faculty research days each semester, or by an online medium such as *Blackboard*. Topics for sessions could include the following:

- reasons adults return to college,
- the academic experience of returning to the classroom,
- learning styles of adult learners, and
- the need for adult students to comprehend that information learned in the classroom has a direct link to the real world.

Another helpful practice would be for colleges to designate one counselor to focus on the re-entry population. This counselor could be available in the student services division to assist students returning to school as an adult. The counselor could meet individually with students as an initial contact and as follow-up, and also act as a liaison to faculty. Additional student services for adult students are job and career services designed to meet the needs of adult re-entry students. These services could help adult students to address concerns about entering or changing a career at midlife and provide current information on their employment outlook on a chosen occupation.

Colleges could also provide seminars and workshops (such as time management, stress management, etc.) on topics of interest to the re-entry student population and schedule these for both day and evening students. The workshop information could also be made available online for students whose schedules do not permit on-campus participation.

Lastly, information could be disseminated to the community about opportunities available to adults considering a return to education. This could be accomplished through newsletters, press releases, flyers, and informational workshops at prominent community locations.

A Postscript

After the research interviews were completed, I received an email from a 34-year-old woman regarding her desire to enroll in fall semester classes. Her words poignantly conveyed the transitions, fears, hopes, and expectations of the adult student re-entering education:

I have always been afraid of trying to go to college. Because it's been so long since I have been to school. I'm afraid I have forgotten a lot of my book knowledge. My youngest child is almost 14, so I figure I better start doing something about a career now, so I'll have something to fall back on. I have always wanted to go to college, but I had to put my dreams on the back burner because I was busy raising my children. Well, they are almost grown now, so I figure it's about time for me to do something for me.

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[Return to Contents Page](#)