Who are adult learners in higher education, and how do they differ from younger college students? In this chapter, the author presents an overview of adult student enrollment patterns, their participation motivators, and their lifestyle differences from younger college students.

Setting the Stage: Adults in Higher Education

Carol E. Kasworm

Who is an adult learner in higher education? Most would answer that all college students are adults, believing that the age of eighteen and above indicates adulthood. However, within higher education, historical patterns of adult student participation have been distinctive; beliefs about adult learner needs for specialized policies, services, and learning delivery structures have been unique; and relationships between the traditional youth environments and the needed access, flexibility, and support for adult learners have been problematic. In this chapter, I focus on the concept of the adult student as one who represents the status of age (typically defined as twenty-five years of age and older); the status of maturity and developmental complexity acquired through life responsibilities, perspectives, and financial independence; and the status of responsible and often-competing sets of adult roles reflecting work, family, community, and college student commitments.

This chapter provides readers with national demographics, key frameworks for understanding participation motivators, and key descriptive differences between younger and older undergraduate students. As noted by the chapter title, this discussion provides an introductory context for understanding and serving adult student needs.

Place of Adult Students in Higher Education

Adult students in higher education represent a growing population in the shifting terrain of higher education. In the past thirty years, adult students have increased dramatically in both absolute number and in the percentage of the student population in relation to younger students. From 1971 to
1991, adult students increased from 28 percent to 43 percent of total undergraduate enrollment, currently representing over four million students. With the recent baby-boom growth of youth headed to college during the 1990s, adult students continued to increase in number but represented a smaller percentage of the undergraduate population. Nonetheless, it is projected that the undergraduate adult student enrollments will continue to represent 35 to 38 percent of the undergraduate population for the next fifteen years (National Center for Education Statistics, 1995, 2002a).

Over six million adult undergraduate and graduate students were enrolled in 2000, more than the total collegiate enrollment in 1968. Changes have continued over the past thirty years in the age-group percentages of enrolled collegiate students. In 1970, college students aged fourteen to twenty-one years represented 55.3 percent of the collegiate population; however, in 2010, it is estimated that fourteen- to twenty-one-year-old students will represent only about 46.3 percent of the collegiate population. The remaining age representation will reflect 15.5 percent of students aged twenty-two to twenty-four years, and 38.2 percent will be adults aged twenty-five years and older (National Center for Education Statistics, 1995, 1997, 2002a).

**Understanding the Why of Adult Participation**

Increased adult participation in college represents changing beliefs by adults and our society about the importance of a college credential linked to work stability, financial support, and related life opportunities. For example, significant societal economic restructuring has influenced a projected one-third of all jobs, which are identified as “in flux” each year (Kohl and LaPidus, 2000). Some of these changes are occurring through technology and the global economy, dramatically affecting both the personal and work lives of adults. In addition, increasing expectations in adult work worlds are requiring access to new knowledge through collegiate participation. A 1994 survey stated that 56 percent of business establishments reported an increase in job-skill requirements within the previous 3 years, while only 5 percent reported a reduction in skill requirements (National Center for Educational Quality of the Workforce, 1995; National Center for Education Statistics, 2002c).

The why of adult student enrollment also reflects the commitment by American higher education to more open access and egalitarian outreach to all populations. From the late 1800s through the dramatic effects of World War II’s returning veterans and the GI Bill, as well as the women’s movement, the civil rights movement, and other historic events and public policies, adult students have gained an increased presence in higher education.

This increase in older students has brought with it an increase in student diversity. Women make up a larger percentage of adult students than men, and their number is growing at a faster rate. From 1970 to 2000,
female adult enrollments have increased by 59.2 percent while male adult enrollments have increased by 40.8 percent. In particular, the number of women aged thirty-five has grown a substantial 500 percent (National Center for Education Statistics, 1995). Further, minority adult students represent about 24 percent of the adult undergraduate population (National Center for Education Statistics, 1995). This is significant participation compared with national trends of younger minority student participation. Higher percentages of minority adult students than traditional-aged minority students are enrolled in two-year colleges, whereas their percentages of enrollment in four-year institutions appear to be less than those of their younger colleagues (Kasworm, 2002) (Table 1.1).

Motivators and Goals for Adult Students’ Participation

Most student affairs professionals are concerned with the key goals that motivate adult student attendance, believing them to be key recruitment and retention factors. The most recent study by the College Board highlights a common theme of past studies—most adult students (85 percent) report that career reasons are their key college enrollment goal (Aslanian, 2001).

There also are other reasons to pursue higher education. Five percent or fewer cite college enrollment in response to family transitions; leisure needs; artistic interests; and education in the life areas of health, religion, and citizenship (Aslanian, 2001). Although these key goals often are convenient social labels for researcher questions, each adult enrolls in college with a complex set of beliefs, internal demands, and external pressures. In extensive interviews with adult undergraduates, Kasworm and Blowers
(1994) found that the students’ key motives and goals typically included four differing unique themes, and these key motivator themes were reported to change during their college participation.

Some suggest that career pursuits were the key goal for adult enrollment, but I would suggest that it is equally helpful to consider adult life-context motivators. From this perspective, adults were motivated to enroll in college and continue to be influenced in their participation by internal life developmental changes, external planning to create a different future life in their adult world, or a mixture of the two life-context motivators.

**Personal Transitions and Changes.** Many adults are influenced to enroll in college following key life transitions and changes that foster new understandings or perspectives in individuals or present conditions in which college is viewed as necessary. Aslanian (2001) suggests that most adults enroll in college based on these personal life transitions or catalysts reflecting environmental forces, life changes, or external life-transition events. For example, adults may enter college because of a divorce, children entering school, a recent job loss, or a denied job promotion due to the lack of a college degree (Kasworm, 2002).

**Proactive Life Planning.** Although some adults react to their changing worlds and respond to or are dramatically pushed toward the pursuit of higher education, another group is purposeful and proactive about creating change and seeking a new world of opportunities. Through beliefs of self-efficacy and of future planning for their life, these adults seek new life choices that will provide greater benefits and rewards. In the 1994 Kasworm and Blowers research study, many of the adult students interviewed were proactive planners who sought out college studies after several years of thinking and strategizing. Many noted that they had planned for college with a purposeful relocation to a new community with a university, pursuit of employment in a company with a tuition-reimbursement plan or a more complementary work situation, or negotiation with family for support of college attendance. These proactive planners were motivated to enter college and spoke to their determination to understand the collegiate system and how to succeed as a student. Proactive planners were more likely to seek out adult degree or external degree programs, distance-learning delivery systems, or specialized instructional scheduling to support their complex adult lifestyles (Kasworm, 2002).

**Mixed Motivators.** A third group of adults was motivated to enroll in college by both responding to life transitions and proactively planning for goals and life priorities through college studies. Although this third group represented diverse adult students, these individuals typically had attended college for a year or more before their current entry back to college. Their current goals and motives reflected both a changed perspective and enhanced complexity from their earlier beliefs. At this juncture in their lives, they saw themselves identifying three to six life-transition and proactive planning goals for college participation (Kasworm and Blowers, 1994).
Another group of adult students with this mixed motive set also was influenced partially to enroll in college by societal messages and power relationships between themselves and their world (Kasworm and Blowers, 1994; Quinnan, 1997). For example, some adults believed that a college degree would confer prestige and a higher social class standing. Some believed that their work life would change because college-educated coworkers would include them in social events and more significant work projects on receipt of a college degree.

Are Adult Undergraduates Different from Young Adult Students?

Obviously, there are many differences beyond age between adult and younger adult undergraduates. In this section, I provide an overview of enrollment patterns of adult students; related understandings of part-time versus full-time enrollment; and the influence of work, financial factors, and family influence on these two groups.

Selection and Participation in Types of Collegiate Institutions. Adult undergraduate students typically enroll in a college that is readily accessible, relevant to current life needs, cost-effective, flexible in course scheduling, and supportive of adult lifestyle commitments. However, some adults also are committed to pursuing colleges that are prestigious (and perhaps not adult-student friendly) or that offer specialized academic programs with requirements for full-time attendance (such as architecture). Enrollment in such programs is a significant financial and life commitment for adult students.

Nationally, 58.7 percent of adult undergraduate students participate in two-year or under institutions (that is, community colleges, technical institutes, and certain proprietary schools) (National Center for Education Statistics, 1997). Twenty-two percent of adult undergraduates seek out public four-year and above institutions, more often at regional universities rather than major research-oriented public universities. Four-year private, not-for-profit institutions have 9.4 percent of adult student enrollment, often through specialized adult degree programs or evening divisions separate from the daytime young-adult residential campus program. In fact, the percentage of students aged twenty-three years and older increased from 38 percent in 1986 to 47 percent in 1992, largely attributable to accelerated adult degree programs in these institutions. And last, 8.3 percent of adult students enroll in private for-profit institutions (for example, University of Phoenix).

Enrollment and Work. Historically significant differences are identifiable between younger and adult undergraduates regarding full-time versus part-time enrollment and full-time versus part-time or no work involvement. Adults continue to be predominantly part-time students (69 percent) compared with 27 percent of younger undergraduate students (National Center for Education Statistics, 1995). This part-time status
meaning that adults are time-focused on adult life demands, with a more limited time commitment and priority to collegiate involvement beyond the classroom.

Obviously, work roles are a major influencer of adult participation, being both the key incentives and barriers to adult participation. In a 1989–90 study, more than 46 percent of adult students worked full-time (over forty hours a week), and an additional 25 percent worked more than twenty hours a week. Furthermore, adult collegiate participation appears to be influenced by employer support and the flexibility of work roles. Although limited research has been reported in this area, it is suggested that the level of expertise and responsibility of the adult job role does influence collegiate participation. This perspective can be substantiated in part by the levels of collegiate participation by employed adult students. Current statistics suggest a more predominant representation of adult students in professional and managerial roles (18 percent), whereas lesser percentages of adult students represent trade workers (10 percent) and sales, service, and support workers (13 percent) (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002c, 2002d) (Table 1.2).

Some higher education leaders have suggested that because adult students work, they have limited need for financial assistance to attend college. One interesting challenge to this assumption comes from comparisons of students’ reported incomes. Fifty-eight percent of young adults report less than $10,000 income, whereas only 28 percent of adult students (aged twenty-five or older) report the same economic circumstances. Although adult students have slightly higher income levels, they also typically support other members of the household, unlike younger college students. Most adult students (43.4 percent) report income of $10,000 to $29,999, but only 29 percent report income of $30,000 or higher (National Center for Education Statistics, 1995). Like young undergraduates, adult students also find that financial resources for college attendance continue to be a major issue for participation. The 1989–90 study of older undergraduate students found that 44 percent of younger college undergraduates received external financial support, but only 39 percent of adult students did (National Center for Education Statistics, 1995). However, unlike younger undergraduates, adult students cannot expect that parents will provide collegiate support. Adult student college funding was more likely to come from limited discretionary family income, possibly from college financial aid, and sometimes from employer tuition plans (8.6 percent). Adult students report that their most important issue and most stressful concern is their financial fragility to support college attendance (Kasworm, 2002).

Family Commitments. Adult undergraduates value family-supportive collegiate environments because 57 percent of them are married and 53 percent are supporting dependents other than a spouse. In particular, the responsibility of children has been both a major inspiration and a major
deterrent to participation. Currently, about 25 percent of twenty-four- to twenty-nine-year-olds, 69 percent of thirty- to thirty-nine-year-olds, and 58 percent of forty-year-old and older adult students are parents with dependent children. In addition, 29 percent of adult students are single parents, most of whom are women between the ages of thirty and forty. This key life commitment places special demands on both adult students and student services professionals regarding their collegiate services and supports.

**Implications for Student Services**

In the following chapters, specific services and perspectives for supporting this important and highly diverse set of students are examined. The future for adult student services will rely on critically reflective leaders and practitioners who will continue to redefine the collegiate institution through its student services. How should student services respond to learners who continually enter and exit the institution; who hold key adult roles of family, work, and societal leadership; and who are engaged learners whether they seek only selected courses or a baccalaureate degree? These adults are the growing student population of lifelong learners who seek out collegiate institutions and student services that support learning situated within complex adult lives. Adult students’ needs and goals are equally important but somewhat different from their younger colleagues’ because they are in a different place in life and view the world and their future differently. Contemporary leaders will open the doors of the institution to them and provide a helpful, supportive environment for their future success.

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**Table 1.2. Comparative Statistics on Selected Characteristics Between Older and Younger Adult Undergraduates**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Comparative Status</th>
<th>Older Students (≥25 years), %</th>
<th>Younger Students (&lt;25 years), %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Part-time course load</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full-time worker, part-time student</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>36</td>
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<tr>
<td>Full-time worker, full-time student</td>
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<td>23</td>
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<tr>
<td>Married or separated</td>
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<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dependent children</td>
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<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First-generation college student</td>
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<td>44</td>
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<tr>
<td>Financial aid to all students</td>
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<td>44</td>
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<tr>
<td>Grant support</td>
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<td>36</td>
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<tr>
<td>Loans</td>
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<td>21</td>
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<tr>
<td>Employer aid</td>
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<td>Full-time student financial aid support</td>
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<td>41</td>
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<td>African-American student representation</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note:* Percentages come from a variety of studies and of years and slightly differing definitions of older and younger student groupings.

References


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