The State of Adult Student Re-Entry
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ABSTRACT

Many smaller colleges and universities are experiencing a drop in traditional-age student enrollments. Higher education costs, as evidenced by enormous student loans, a smaller cohort of 18–22-year-olds, and the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, have led to fewer traditional students attending. Smaller institutions tend to have lower endowment funding and rely primarily on tuition revenue. Due to sheer necessity, higher education institutions are interested in recruiting and retaining adult students. On a per capita basis, adult students yield more net revenue than traditional-age students as they do not require all amenities offered to their younger cohort. Colleges find attracting earlier drop-outs cost-effective rather than seeking new adult students. Various factors determine when and where adult student re-entry occurs, including timing, funding, institution reputation, opinion of their network, and intended career outcomes. This qualitative phenomenological study utilized a focus group to explore adult students’ experience returning to complete their diplomas. The research question guiding the study is: What influences adult students to return to complete their bachelor’s degrees at a specific time and institution? Understanding the re-entry phenomenon is pertinent to aid practitioners’ preparation in enrolling and retaining adult learners to benefit the student’s future and institution’s retention rates and fiscal health.

Keywords: Adult students, college choice, re-entry, retention.

1. Introduction

Enrollment in higher education across the U.S. has steadily climbed until recently. The National Center for Education Statistics (n.d.) stated a 35% growth in enrollment for both traditional and adult students from 2000 to 2012 and “projects the rate of increase for students under age 25 to be 12%, compared with 20% for students age 25 and over in the next decade.” However, the turnover among adult students is especially high. Adult students are a student population with their own needs and circumstances (Deggs, 2011). It is incumbent upon colleges and universities to be aware of the unique needs of this growing student population in order to recruit, enroll, and retain them. Edwards et al. (2013) categorize challenges unique to adult students as situational, institutional, and dispositional. Situational barriers are limitations arising from a student’s life situation.

Institutional barriers are policies and practices of schools that discourage adults from participating in educational endeavours. In contrast, dispositional barriers are attitudes and perceptions that prevent adult students from returning to complete their degrees. To benefit from the enrollment that this student population brings to an institution, by way of their experience, diversity, and tuition dollars, administrators in higher education will need to attract and retain adult learners purposefully. Retention rates for undergraduate students seeking a bachelor’s degree have risen modestly recently, from 58% in 2012 to about 62% in 2018 (Hussar et al., 2020).

This study aims to provide information to arm colleges and universities to serve adult learners better when returning to a four-year institution to finish their bachelor’s degrees.

2. Literature Review

There are a multitude of reasons prospective students select colleges and universities. Literature regarding college choice for traditional students includes family influence (Workman, 2015), financial aid eligibility (Broekemier, 2002; Davis et al., 2013; Titus & Pusser, 2011), self-confidence (Deggs, 2011; Moakler & Kim, 2014), program of study, job placement upon graduation (Broekemier, 2002), and demographic factors (Moakler & Kim, 2014;
Poon & Byrd, 2013). Research exploring college choice for adult students varies from that of traditional-age students due to the differences in lifestyle. Factors include the availability of programs of study when courses are offered, the reputation of the institution (Broekemier, 2002), lack of energy, family issues, and scheduling conflicts. Lifelong learning (Parks et al., 2013), new career opportunities (Dwyer et al., 2013), and economic factors (Dwyer et al., 2013).

With more of a gap in education than traditional students, adult students have varying life circumstances, creating unique barriers to degree attainment. Time management, lack of self-confidence, using technology, and financing their degree are perceived barriers adults face (Deggs, 2011). However, Deggs (2011) estimated barriers for adult students as being more intrinsic than actual. Students overcame barriers by being organized and using time management, taking the initiative to find support from family and faculty, and taking time to relax and find balance.

Kimmel et al. (2012) credited financing their education, the convenience of attending courses, family and work obligations, experience in college, and a general fear of returning to school as barriers adult learners face in returning to college. Orgnero (2013) added that the ability to complete coursework and select courses were causes of anxiety for a student returning to college after a 15-year gap. Colvin (2013) affirmed the barriers for adult students, stating, “The minefields are especially broad and deep for the nontraditional student, and only the most persistent gain entry” (p. 169) barriers to re-entry, whether perceived or actual, impact when and where adult students continue their education.

Recruiting adult students is now more important than ever for institutions of higher learning as this student population is already significant and only growing (Cruce & Hillman, 2012; Deggs, 2011). Cruce and Hillman (2012) stated, “Although college leaders and educational policymakers are aware of the current demographic shifts, many do not appear to have yet responded to the educational demand of a growing segment of the population” due to a lack of empirical evidence regarding adult student preference. Additionally, literature about adult students tends to be outdated, “anecdotal or policy-oriented”, and “far more information is available on demographic characteristics of the student body than on the expressed opinions and attitudes of returning students themselves” (Broekemier, 2002, p. 38). Furthermore, “while a number of studies have addressed the relative importance of college choice criteria to traditional-aged college students, little information has been reported regarding the importance of college choice criteria to the large adult student segment”, which can result in “erroneous generalizations” (Broekemier, 2002, p. 38). Thus, there is a gap regarding re-entry and college choice for adult students.

3. Methodology

This study aims to explore college choice for adult students with prior college as they re-enter a bachelor’s program. The study aims to inform administrators how to best recruit and retain this student population through admissions. A qualitative, phenomenological design (Saldaña, 2009) was utilized to explore adult students’ individual experiences as they re-enter college. The research question explored was, “What influences adult students to return to complete their bachelor’s degrees at a specific time and institution?”

Participants were selected based on purposeful, homogeneous sampling due to their “information-rich” nature and shared characteristics (Patton, 2002). Participants completed their capstone courses before graduation, had attended college before their current institution, and were asked to reflect upon their decision-making process regarding institutional choice and the timing of their return.

Participants (N = 15) were asked to participate in a 60-minute focus group after the last meeting of their capstone course. The focus group was large enough to generate rich discussions but not too large, where participants’ perspectives were left out (Patton, 2002). Participants signed informed consent documentation and were assured that their choice to participate would not impact their outcome in their capstone course or student status. Participants were interviewed until saturation was achieved (Patton, 2002) and were debriefed to ensure the researchers understood the themes to be the same as the participants intended. Limitations include participants being from the same cluster of majors and close to completing their degree requirements, indicating they successfully completed the re-entry process.

4. Findings

Four major themes emerged as determining factors for the timing of re-entry for this student population:

1. Having the time to attend classes and complete coursework,
2. Securing the funding to finance their education,
3. The recommendation to return to a specific college by their networks,
4. The need to utilize education as a vehicle to improve career opportunities.

Two supplemental themes included anxiety about returning to college and barriers students perceived as obstacles to re-entry. Once the logistics of the barriers were resolved, students found their anxiety to be perceived and not actual.

4.1. Timing

The time participants could return to higher education was a significant decision-making factor in determining re-entry. Completing a bachelor’s degree was a common goal for the participants; it was a long-term plan for some, but finding the “right time” to return was discussed as a common challenge. A participant described losing her job due to her company outsourcing positions, including hers, as the motivation for her to return. “I suddenly had time on my hands, and I was not sure what I was going to do from a career perspective, so it became the perfect opportunity to return to complete my degree.” Another shared, “My children all left for college, leaving me with extra time
and no more excuses”. One added, “I planned to return to school for so long, but I was always focused on my career and moving up the ladder. When it became apparent that I could no longer advance with my associate’s, it was clear that the timing was right for me to make earning a bachelor’s my priority”.

While the last participant credited losing employment as making her return possible, desired career outcomes were commonly noted as reasons for re-entry.

4.2. Career Advancement

Career advancement was commonly indicated as a factor for adult students returning to pursue a four-year degree. Related data included, “I got to a point in my job where I could no longer advance unless I had a degree.” Another echoed, “I got a promotion at work that did not allow me to come to class, so I dropped out for ten years. Then I applied for a position, and I was the first runner up, and they said, ‘well, if you had your degree . . .’, so that made up my mind.” A participant expressed frustration at work, “I had trained the last three VPs in my area. The only reason I was not being considered was that I stopped after an associate’s”. Another explained, “A co-worker I have a competitive relationship with was going back to finish his degree, and I could not let him be my boss, so I started the same program”. Participants noted their decision to return to college as being directly correlated to experiencing a lack of career progression.

Achieving financial stability in a changing economy was also stated as a motivator for students’ re-entry. “I came back due to the economy taking a downturn. I had a two-year degree, and I was topped out at what I do for a career. Our organization is somewhat stable, but you never know what tomorrow will bring. Having an associate’s will no longer get you into the doors”. Participants emphasized returning to school to plan for their future.

4.3. Funding

Integral in deciding when a college return would be possible was how students were able to fund their educations. For example, “My new company’s tuition reimbursement policy was a catalyst for me returning when I did. I figured jobs and benefits change, and while I am here, I should take advantage”. Another student cited government funding through her Veterans Affairs benefits as factoring into her decision-making, “I always planned to go to college since I paid into my GI Bill, but it was not until I researched what it covered and learned the necessary steps that I decided it was a time I could go back”. A participant funded her tuition through private scholarships, and once she was able to secure the funding, she was able to return:

“I always unfortunately took the approach in life: work full time, school second, which helped me career-wise but has always been somewhat resting on my shoulders. Then I was faced with accruing college loans in my 50s and was not pleased with the idea. After attending a family reunion, I realized we had potential scholarship money available that I already qualified for.” (Participant 004)

Students noted that acquiring funding was a logistic that had to be arranged before their return to college and that it was a barrier until resolved.

4.4. Institutional Reputation and Advice of Others

Participants cited the institution’s reputation and others’ opinions as factoring into their decision-making regarding where and when to continue their education. One participant described:

“I had earned my associate’s degree from another university, and I found that I was actually ashamed of it. Then I heard someone at work one day talking about graduating from here, and that is literally what led me here. Everyone had heard things at work, and during conversations about it, people turned their heads, saying how great a school it was. That is all it took for me.” (Participant 003)

Another student added, “My supervisor told me to go here. As simple and clear cut as that.” Another participant had a familial connection with the school that determined where she would attend, “my husband graduated from here many, many years ago and had such a great experience that I did not look at any other school.” Other students had friends and parents who graduated from the same institution, giving them comfort and direction when they started contemplating a return to complete their degree.

Supplemental findings included participants discussing anxiety about returning to higher education and how they overcame their anxiety to achieve their bachelor’s degree. Participants indicated being anxious about not having the ability and time to complete academic coursework and fearing being the oldest classmate after a gap in their education. Upon their return, they indicated that their most significant challenges were finding a balance among their various obligations and that their original concerns were more perceived than actual.

Ways in which students noted overcoming their concerns and barriers to complete their coursework included finding “informal support systems”, “being more diligent and having to seek things out on my own”, and making “really good relationships with some of my professors” as keys to successfully completing their degrees this time around.

“Once I started and understood what I was up against, I said, ‘OK, I can do this’ and figured out what I had to do to make it happen as I went along”.

Taking more initiative was also described as a way to be successful.

5. Discussion

Timing, career advancement, funding, and advice of others all factored into the decision-making for adult students’ re-entry into a four-year institution in pursuit of four-year degrees. Career opportunities and economic factors were determining factors for many students returning to higher education. Participants noted that they had missed opportunities professionally without a bachelor’s degree, and supervisors instructed some to continue their studies while others were planning for their financial futures. However, some students held the proposition that
employment acts as an opportunity cost that competes with schooling (Bozick et al., 2021).

Participants also valued the advice of others regarding reputation (Broekemier, 2002) when selecting an institution of higher education due to reputation and the personal experience of those in their network. Workman (2015) cited family influence as a reason traditional-aged students select specific institutions to attend. A participant noted feeling embarrassed about an associate’s degree from a for-profit university and not even considering other institutions when her coworkers spoke highly of their experiences at or knowledge of the institution the participant attended.

As Deggs (2011) indicated, adult students have unique circumstances that lead to their re-entry and degree completion from that of traditional-aged students. Perhaps the most disparate decision-making factor between traditional and adult students regarding college choice is timing. Adult student participants described needing to find the right time for re-entry and that many factors contributed to deciding when they would re-enter. Participants cited having the time to complete coursework due to family and work obligations and the ability to pay for their return to education as factors in the timing of their re-entry (Kimmel et al., 2012), among others.

Anxiety (Orgnero, 2013) regarding returning to college after a long gap in education and having the ability to complete the academic coursework to be successful were other contributing factors for adult students when deciding upon when they would return to an academic setting. Participants also acknowledged that anxiety was only perceived but was not real as they proceeded through their courses (Deggs, 2011). Actions they took to overcome their anxiety included taking the initiative to find solutions and find a work-school-life balance (Deggs, 2011).

6. IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Practitioners should consider the unique needs of adult learners when creating programming, policies, and processes that serve and impact this student population. Understanding adult student experiences and challenges through re-entry can help address and overcome the concerns of this student population while they continue and hopefully complete their education.

Removing barriers to access and retention can help both the student to succeed and the institution to bolster retention rates and fiscal health. Being equipped to serve this growing student population better is paramount for institutions in garnering student enrollment and retention.

7. CONCLUSIONS

College student personnel can benefit from this study in several ways. In recruiting prospective students, admission representatives can provide detailed information regarding financing education, including grants, scholarships, and lending opportunities. The focus should be on the institution’s reputation, if positive when planning outreach, advertising, and marketing. Additionally, if there is an opportunity to promote alum experience or successes to prospective students or engage alums in the admissions process, prospective students could be better recruited and retained, potentially translating into alums themselves. Thus, the experience and retention of current students are significant in new student enrollment as the adult student population values the reputation and recommendations of those in their network. Finally, addressing incoming students’ anxiety by providing one-on-one attention and comprehensive information regarding program requirements and student services available will help make student anxiety perceived and not actual. Providing structure for formal and informal support systems will enable students to garner the support they need to succeed.

References


