Undergraduate Mature Student Retention & Support

2015 Version

Synopsis

Based on recent literature, it is clear there is a changing face of what is considered a 'student'. There is a rise of individuals commencing university studies who are not entering straight from high school, referred to by many scholars, as mature students. This term can includes single parents, those returning to education after working, new career aspirations, army veterans and women. Due to the changing economic climate, many people are returning to (or beginning) postsecondary studies, whether to stay current, increase their skills or learn new skills required for their workplace (Cannady, 2011: Compton, Cox & Laanan, 2006: McLean & Rollwagon, 2010: Stevens, 2014: van Rhijn et al., 2015). Studies also show that in addition to returning to education for job raises or a new job, people are also returning for their personal satisfaction (Cannady, 2011). The number of mature students is increasing (Deggs, 2011: Markle, 2015: Rabourn et al. 2015: Stoessel et al., 2015), yet even with the influx of enrolment, these student withdraw at a higher rate than students entering studies straight from high school (Haddow, 2013: Roberts, 2011). Studies (e.g. Deggs, 2011) present evidence to suggest there are many challenges faced by undergraduate mature students which, if left untreated, cause a decline in retention rates. These challenges include barriers such as: interpersonal, career and job-related and academic (Deggs, 2011:1540).

Keys Points from the Literature

There appears to be disconnect between higher education practices and inclusion of mature students because of changes to what classifies a 'student' in today's society. Therefore, there is a clear need for retention practices for this group if they are to be successful throughout their educational journey.

Most literature refers to mature students as those who are at least 25 years of age. However, there are still multiple terms, such as non-traditional (see: Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002: Roberts, 2011) and adult learners (see: Rabourn et al., 2015) to address these types of students.

In many cases, mature individuals have additional roles to play, such as parent and/or full-time worker, in addition to a student role, which tend to be stressors (Richburg et al., 2012: Giancola et al. 2009: Markle, 2015: Roberts, 2011). For example, a feeling of guilt persists in some mature students who feel they are not spending enough time with their family (Stone & O;Shea, 2013).

Motivation levels appear high for many mature students, as this is typically one of the reasons they return/start education. Not only are mature students remaining in education for work

purposes, but they also want to be a positive role model for their family (Markle, 2015: Samuels et al., 2011: Schmidt, 2015).

Institutions are dealing with ill-prepared students (Fincher, 2010). Roberts (2011:195) addressed the "lack of preparation for the academic side of university life, raising questions about where the responsibility rests in ensuring that expectations match realities".

There needs to be an understanding that not all students learn in a similar manner. Mature students come from an array of social and educational backgrounds. "Adults often seek to learn materials that they need to use immediately rather than some point in the future (Cannady et al. 2011:158). "Compared to their traditional-aged peers, adult learners are more engaged academically, interact less with their peers and faculty, have positive perceptions of teaching practices and interactions with others, and find their campus to be less supportive" (Rabourn et al. 2015:21).

There are no consistent results of studies examining positive versus negative effects on mature student retention and support with age, socioeconomic status, location and sex. While there are many new PhD theses examining the topic of mature student retention and support, these studies also acknowledge small sample sizes and limited demographics in the literature (E.g. Chase, 2014: Schmidt, 2015).

While changing norms have enabled females to enter education (Compton et al., 2006), gender differences still exist in mature student experiences, as women are still considered the role of "carers", while males are still considered the "breadwinners" (Stone & O'Shea, 2013:106).

If you increase the satisfaction rates, you increase student retention (Anderson, 2011).

Access, such as flexibility of course offerings, is an influencing factor for mature individuals to join university, due to the large number of students balancing additional roles (Brown, 2012).

Financial stress is witnessed worldwide for mature students (e.g. Roberts, 2011: Saar et al., 2014: Stone & O'Shea, 2013).

<u>**Recommendations**</u>

Create a standardized method to measure student retention in mature students, as Fincher (2010) established, no such method exists to date. van Rhijn et al. (2015:20) have found that many mature students who drop out have intentions to return to studies, and therefore refer to these students as 'stopping out', versus 'dropping out'. Therefore, a way to determine student retention is required for further studies.

Ensure all parties (faculty, administrative staff, etc.) are aware of the barriers mature students face and work together as a cohesive group for a better understanding of mature student retention (Deggs, 2011: Rowlands, 2010: van Rhijn et al., 2015).

Support networks need to change as we see an increase of mature students entering undergraduate studies. There are disadvantages to students lacking certain skills (Leese, 2010). Institutions should determine the key skills a student must possess in order to achieve success in university. Ensure students are aware of this and there are support avenues available at the institution if the student does not already possess these skills.

Meet the needs of the learner, such as increasing flexibility of learning through availability of online and evening courses (Brown, 2012 :Chase, 2014). Additionally, institutions could offer courses similar to bridging courses as seen at Guilford College, which has been shown to influence the success rates of students by increasing their GPA (Stripling, 2010). There have been some universities in Ontario implementing this practice (see Kerr, 2011).

Institutions also need to recognize the need for support in training mature students about technological advances used in education and stress management. Programs to offer support in areas such as conducting library research, through library online modules (Cannady, 2011) and technology, such as computer use (Leese, 2010) might alleviate some of the stressors faced by mature students to improve retention rates. Stress-management workshops appear to have a positive correlation between stress management and grades for mature students (Richburg et al. 2012). "Without devising needs and systems specifically focused on the adult learner, universities will not be successful in engaging, recruiting or retaining the adult learner population successfully over the long term" (Stevens, 2014:65).

Offer greater means of financial support for mature students.

Institutions could include families in some university events (Kaldi & Griffiths, 2013: Giancola et al. 2009). van Rhijn et al. (2015) suggests offering orientations during evenings/weekends and services, such as childcare, during orientations. Institutions should take into consideration that friends and family tend to be a large support network for mature students (Kaldi & Griffiths, 2013).

While a number of studies have been conducted in several United States locations, there remains an overall understanding by scholars that more research is required to obtain a greater understanding of undergraduate mature student retention and success. For example, increase studies across a number of universities (Schmidt, 2015).

Suggested Reading

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van Rhijn, T., Lero, D., Dawczyk, A., de Guzman, J., Pericak, S., Fritz, V., ... & Osborne, C. (2015). Student pathways and supports: Investigating retention and attrition in mature university students.

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