

Mature Student Retention & Support 2010 Version

Fincher (2010) writes that “Adult student retention is neither insignificant nor identical to retention for traditional students” (p. 12). Notably, because of periodic changes in employment, “occupational education” is crucial through people’s lives in order to remain competitive (Caro & Morris, 1991; Shugart, 2008). Mature students’ experiences are shaped by the department culture, lecturers’ teaching styles, and the academic study itself. Practical issues, such as access to the library, personal relationships, and “coping with multiple roles” impact the learning experience. First year orientation was noted as being a socialization process in which aspirations and hopes diminished when faced with the realities of being a mature student on campus (Becker, 2009; Merrill 2001). The general consensus among scholars is that universities reject the stigmatization of adult learners and work towards a more collaborative and smoother experience for mature students (Crawford Sorey & Harris Duggan, 2009).

Key Points from the Literature

- Significant challenges include a) *access* – and how this shapes beyond opening doors to adult learners, but more so institutional access to the multicultural campus, and making sure a comprehensive and supportive experience is provided; b) *varied learners, multiple outcomes* – explores a tension between credit, noncredit and community outreach, and how this appeals to adult learners; c) *Reframing support* – currently institutions view support thorough youth culture, and this needs to be changed given adult learners experience greater family and financial hardship (Giancola et al, 2009; Kasworm, Sandmann & Sissel, 2000).
- Mature students experience a stressful “interrole conflict” simultaneously with “lower positive and higher negative appraisals” from their professors (Giancola et al, 2009, p. 246). As a result, these positive and negative appraisals will shape adaptation skills to the learning environment.
- Past experiences, or other dispositional barriers such as self-esteem or attitudes towards learning, also hinder participation. Racism and sexism are important factors to consider, as they discourage participation on both individual and institutional levels (Castle et al., 2006).
- Only universities possess the power to recognize and value knowledge; gained knowledge and learning must be consistent with the norms and regulations of the university; lecturers feel divided by wishing to be fair to the individual, yet also must conform to institutional criteria and uphold standards; and students and lecturers perceive this process differently, and approach from different perspectives (Peters, 2008; Shugart, 2008).
- Interdisciplinarity enables mature students to avoid negative effects of applying knowledge from one field into a monodisciplinary study (Toynton, 2005).
- Higher education institutions value greatly systematically evaluating the “product” that they provide to mature students in order to assess if students’ goals are being met, and to assess the risks involved (Woodley & Wilson, 2002).
- Many institutions in the UK waive their traditional entry requirements for mature students. This might be a pitfall, since mature students lack recent academic experience, causing greater challenge in adjustment (Richardson, 1994a).
- Mature students might be more liable to withdraw from their studies. This stems largely from part-time studies and departments with lower completion rates (Richardson, 1994b).
- Mature students require increased financial aid because they a) usually have dependents and thus have greater needs and b) are more likely to borrow funds because receive less from family members (McElroy, 2005).

Recommendations

- Employment skills for mature adults; strong ties to regional employers; adjusted achievement expectations; outreach and vocational counseling; faculty training on mature students (Caro & Morris, 1991; Giancola et al, 2009; Schaefer, 2010).
- Creating preparatory courses and/or workshops to merge the gap between time spent out of school to entry into higher education; recognition of credits at all forms of post-secondary education; increased opportunities for part-time study; paid educational leave for the worker; and providing grant-in-aid to the student (Hughes, 1973; Schaefer, 2010; Crawford Sorey & Harris Duggan, 2009).
- Providing a pamphlet that details courses, student accommodation and childcare, providing help from tutors, establishing a mature students' society, and creating a list of grants & awards (Giancola et al, 2009; Roderick & Bell, 1981).
- Pre-entry guidance so that they make informed decisions with their program choice; stronger coordination between bridging programs and for a smoother transition; information about student services; financial support and guidance (Horle & O'Donohue, 1993).
- Creating conditions for nurturing learning leaders; changing working relationships with colleagues; develop enthusiasm for leadership; demonstrate reflective practices (Donaldson, 2008; Fincher, 2010; Crawford Sorey & Harris Duggan, 2009).
- Raise entry standards, decrease academic strictness, slow the pace of learning to allow for more self-directed learning, increase online learning, and provide accelerated programmes, placement testing and remediation, provide tutoring services, enrich the learning quality, involve students in research initiatives, provide international experiences, and use clear and consistent terminologies (Fincher, 2010; Langton, 2006).
- Provide a mature student learning, resource and support centre on campus (Georgian College Institute of Applied Research and Innovation, 2005).

Suggested Reading

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 - Updated by Robert Mizzi (2010)