
Cheryl J. Polson
Jan P. Eriksen

THE IMPACT OF ADMINISTRATIVE SUPPORT AND INSTITUTIONAL TYPE ON ADULT LEARNER SERVICES

The study described examined the scope of existing services for adult learners enrolled in higher education today. Two analyses were performed, one to review the effect of institutional type on services provided and the second to understand the impact of perceived administrative support on efforts to serve this student population. The implications of the findings for academic advisors are addressed.

Today, students over the age of 25 are a larger and more significant presence on the college campus than had ever been expected. The full-time student, aged 18-22, living on campus and attending classes during the day is no longer the norm in American institutions of higher learning. Since 1966 the ranks of part-time students, mostly adults, have increased by about 150 percent (Sparks, 1985). Aslanian and Brickell (1988) report that there are six million adult students who study for college credit every year and that 45 percent of all undergraduate and graduate students are now over 25.

The numbers of adults coming to our campuses will continue to increase throughout the remainder of this century. Apps (1987) predicts that, by 1992, 49 percent of college students will be 25 and older and 47.9 percent will be attending part time. New technological developments, the demands of our information age, and workers desiring mid-career changes make the role of higher education increasingly important in the lives of adults. By the year 2000, 75 percent of all employed American workers will need to be retrained (NUCEA, 1986). Society is undergoing a major transformation. As a result, adults are often faced with transitions which have led to increased need for **lifespan** learning. Unfortunately, our institutions have not adequately responded.

★ **CHERYL J. POLSON, Ph.D.**, is an assistant professor of Adult Education at Kansas State University. She has served in numerous leadership roles in NACADA and created the NACADA Advising the Adult Student Task Force.

JAN P. ERIKSEN, ABD, is an academic counselor in the Office of Continuing Education, Department of Credit Programs, The Ohio State University. She has been very active on the Advising the Adult Student Task Force.

In a synthesis of the literature on non-traditional students in higher education, Hughes (1983) cited a 1974 study in which only half of all colleges and universities had any programs at all for adult students. Hughes also noted studies conducted in 1980 and 1981 which found that there was still a need for institutions to provide services at convenient times and in accessible locations. Adults were confronted with barriers in the forms of residency requirements and of difficulty in transferring courses that had been taken several years previously.

A recent survey of Canadian colleges and universities found that most did not provide counseling services for adults, advisors were usually not available during evenings or weekends, and child care was not provided by the institutions. One-half of the institutions provided orientation and learning assistance programs. Adult students received most of their emotional and academic support from older students' associations on the campuses (Ironsides and Carley, 1986).

Perhaps the primary barrier to more services for adults being offered at American colleges and universities is the often prevailing attitude by institutional administration that the non-traditional student is marginal to the institution's overall mission. Frandson (1977) indicates that many times the mission of the institution's continuing education division, which generally houses adult student services, is perceived by the academic community at large as a service that enhances the university's public relations image or as an enrollment unit which can make up for the loss of full-time traditional enrollments in other academic units. Therefore, the real purpose of continuing education—"to bring to the adult community beyond the college/university campus the opportunity to benefit from the talent, research and resources available to the graduate and undergraduate student in the campus milieu" (p. 9)—is often overlooked. Providing funding to serve adult students is considered unimportant.

Ackell et al. (1982) have defined three stages in an institution's adaptation to adult learners:

- STAGE 1: *The Laissez-Faire Stage.*** The system works neither for nor against adult learners. Barriers are removed, but there is no actual administrative intervention.
- STAGE 2: *The Separatist Stage.*** Adults are segregated from the traditional student and given separate services that are of poorer quality than those offered younger students. Less funding support is given by the institution to adult programs than to programs for younger students.
- STAGE 3: *The Equity Stage.*** Adults are treated fairly; they are given the same quality and quantity of service that the traditional-age students receive.

Many institutions have overlooked the seriousness of today's adult student population. Of this group, 60 percent are degree-seeking students, 50 percent take four or more courses a year, and 25 percent study full time (Aslanian & Brickell, 1988). It is apparent that institutions will need to take immediate steps to move them from the laissez-faire stage to the equity stage as defined by Ackell, et al. (1982).

PURPOSES

One purpose of this study was to determine the degree to which higher education institutions served by members of the National Academic Advising Association (NACADA) provided advising and other specialized services to adult learners. A second purpose was to determine how frequently these institutions employed specific educational delivery systems which are non-traditional in nature. Thirdly, the study sought to establish the frequency with which adult learners at these institutions encountered each of several assumed "barriers" to adult participation in higher education. Finally, the study was concerned with the degree to which findings differed (a) among institutional types and (b) among institutions which experienced different levels of administrative support for adult learners.

PROCEDURES

A survey questionnaire was developed to study the scope of existing services for adult learners attending today's universities and colleges. The instrument used in gathering the data was created by the leadership of the National Academic Advising Association (NACADA) Task Force for Advising Adult Learners. The questionnaire assessed such things as institutional support for adult learners, existing services for this student population, special "target" groups that were identified, and institutional barriers confronted by adult learners on campus. It was mailed to a random sample consisting of one-third of the NACADA members (439). NACADA is an organization consisting of faculty advisors, administrators, professional advisors, counselors, and others in academic and student affairs concerned with the intellectual, personal, and vocational needs of students. Two hundred and thirty three usable responses (53%) were returned. Responses were categorized according to the type of institution in which the respondent was employed: two-year public, four-year private, graduate public, and graduate private. A chi-square analysis was performed to determine if there was a relationship between the size of the institution and its response to adult learners' needs on campus. A second chi-square analysis was performed to examine if there was a relationship between administrative support of educational and support services for adult learners and actual programming efforts to meet adult learner needs.

RESULTS

To assess the amount of change, if any, institutions had made to meet the special needs of adults, respondents were asked to indicate if their institutions had made substantial, moderate, or very minor programming alterations in the past five years. Seventy percent of all institutions represented had altered program offerings and their schedules to accommodate the needs of adult learners. Of that percentage, 18 percent had made substantial changes. Additionally, 77 percent were providing student support services to accommodate this increasing student population. Twenty percent of these institutions indicated they had substantial student support services for adults.

Table 1

Relationship between Administration's Support and Services Offered for Adults (in Percentages).

Service	Degree of Support			Cont. Coef.
	Substantial (N = 46)	Moderate (N = 130)	None or Very Minor (N = 54)	
Offices open non-traditional times	85	61	22	.39
Scholarships/financial aid	50	42	7	.32
Special orientations for adults	87	65	24	.40
Career advising/counseling	87	83	59	.25
Placement services	67	50	39	.19
Preparatory/refresher courses	74	55	19	.36
Ongoing support groups	65	58	28	.27
Academic advising	93	87	46	.40
Adult resource center	39	24	7	.24
Prior learning assessment	50	35	22	.19

Respondents were asked to provide information on the types of special services their institutions currently provide for adults. The chi-square analysis performed to identify the relationship between central administrations' attitude toward providing educational and support services for adult learners and the special services offered for adult learners was significant in all items presented (see Table 1). Institutions whose administration was viewed as supportive were more likely to have support services open at non-traditional times (85%), to sponsor special orientation sessions for adults (87%), to offer preparatory/refresher courses for adults (74%), and were more likely to award credit for prior learning assessment (50%). Institutions with minor or no support from administration were least likely to offer credit for prior learning assessment (22%), to be open at non-traditional times (22%), and to offer special orientation sessions (24%). Regardless of the level of administrative support institutions received, they were less likely to have adult resource centers and were less likely to have available special scholarship/financial aid for adults on their campuses. Academic advising and career advising/counseling were the services most accessible to adults.

When a chi-square analysis was done to examine if the type of institution affected the type of services, only three items were found to be significant. Those included preparatory/refresher courses, ongoing support groups, and adult resource centers. If any institution offered these three items, it was most likely to be a two-year public college. Private colleges and graduate private colleges were least likely to offer the services.

When focusing on the relationship between institutional type and where and when programs and services were offered, the chi-square analysis resulted in three significant items. Not surprisingly, most services were available during the day in at least 71 percent of each of the institutional types. The two-year public college was most likely (96%) to offer these services during evening hours (96%) and off-campus (54%). The four-year private college was least likely to deviate from tradition—they seldom went off-campus (21%) and only half were open in the evenings.

Respondents were also asked if there was a specific target group of adults for which their programs and services were designed. The most frequently identified group was adult re-entry women. Almost all (96%) two-year public colleges, 75 percent of all graduate public and graduate private institutions, and half of the four-year private institutions targeted this group. Two-year colleges were at least 25 times more likely in all instances to target adults with no previous college work (75%), adults with a GED (71%), community and business groups (75%), and workers seeking retraining (75%) than other institutional types.

Administrative support of adult learners appears to be directly linked to policies which most affect them. Respondents who reported having special admission procedures for adults had substantial support from their administrators (59%). The majority of the remaining respondents who had substantial support from administrators felt there was no need for alterations in their admissions policy (36%). Institutions which expressed moderate administrative support tended not to see such policies as necessary (50%); however, 38 percent of the institutions had such policies in place. Individuals with little support from administration tended to be closely divided among those who had such policies (39%), those who felt they didn't need one (33%), and those who felt one was needed (28%).

Table 2 outlines the relationship between institutional type and non-traditional delivery modes/times/locations as determined by a chi-square analysis. Evening courses were the predominant non-traditional delivery learning opportunity extended to adult learners in all institutional types. Although two-year public colleges are most likely to deliver coursework via television (83%), it appears that graduate public institutions are most likely to offer coursework through a combination of media: radio courses (87%), television courses (61%), and correspondence courses (44%). Non-traditional efforts by four-year private colleges have tended to be those which have involved only a change in the time courses are offered, and have not involved structural changes in the courses themselves. It is interesting to note that graduate private colleges are most likely to have degree programs which have been created only for non-traditional students (28%).

The relationship between institutional type and institutional barriers affecting adult learners is exhibited in Table 3. The one area which appears to create a common concern among all institutional types is adult learner access to classes. This was of at least minor concern to 86 percent of the respondents from graduate public institutions, 72 percent from four-year private institutions, 68 percent from two-year public colleges, and 66 percent from graduate private colleges. Outside this concern, two-year public college respondents failed to indicate any other institutional barriers confront-

ing their adult learners. Lack of developmental classes seemed to be another institutional barrier affecting adults in graduate private (74%), four-year private (67%), and graduate public (26%) institutions. Unlike respondents from other institutions, graduate public college respondents tended to view the attitudes of their administrators as a barrier to adult learners (61%).

Table 2

Relationship between Institutional Type and Non-traditional Delivery Modes/Times/Locations (in Percentages).

	Type of Institution				Cont. Coef.
	2-Year Public (N=24)	4-Year Private (N=28)	Grad Public (N=108)	Grad Private (N=40)	
Non-traditional Delivery					
Evening classes	100	71	97	95	.34
Weekend classes	79	36	59	40	.26
Television classes	83	11	61	15	.46
Radio classes	8	—	87	—	.20
Correspondence classes	4	4	44	8	.40
Offered at non-traditional time	38	43	19	40	.23
External degree	4	11	23	3	.25
Degree only for non-traditional students	—	14	8	28	.25

Although academic advising is the student support service most frequently available to adult learners, there does appear to be some variability according to this item. A chi-square analysis was performed to see if advising services varied according to administrative support (see Table 4). Institutions which had at least moderate support offered special advising services for adults 44 percent more often than those which had no, or very minor, support. Another factor which appears to be largely influenced by administrative support is the amount of time devoted to advising adults. In environments supportive of adults, the respondents spent almost half of their time advising adult learners (46%), whereas 81 percent of respondents from non-supportive environments spent 24 percent or less of their time with adult advisees.

This analysis also indicated that, in a large number of instances, advising for adults occurs on campus during evening hours. The respondents from institutions which offered substantial administrative support are most likely to go off campus to advise (41%) and are most likely to be available during the weekends for advising (35%), compared to those with minor administrative support who tend not to take advising off-campus (11%) and are seldom available on weekends (7%).

Table 3

Relationship between Institutional Type and Institutional Barriers Affecting Adult Students (in Percentages).

	<i>Type of Institution *</i>				Cont. Coef.
	2-Year Public (N=25)	4-Year Private (N=24-25)	Grad Public (N=100-106)	Grad Private (N=38-40)	
<i>Institutional Barrier</i>					
Admission policies					
major	4	4	7	8	
minor	4	20	37	31	
no problem	92	76	56	62	.26
Lack of developmental classes					
major	4	25	19	23	
minor	28	42	43	51	
no problem	68	33	38	26	.26
Administrative attitudes					
major	4	21	18	5	
minor	28	25	43	38	
no problem	68	54	39	58	.26
Lack of access to classes					
major	12	36	39	21	
minor	56	36	47	45	
no problem	32	28	14	34	.26

*N varies slightly from question to question depending on number of omits.

Table 4

Relationship between Administration's Support and Advising Services (in Percentages).

	<i>Degree of Support *</i>			Cont. Coef.
	Substantial (N=44-46)	Moderate (N=128-130)	None or Very Minor (N=53-54)	
<i>Advising Service</i>				
Special advising services for adults	78	61	17	.33
Time spent with adults				
100%-50%	46	26	9	.34
49%-25%	21	27	9	
24% or less	34	48	81	
Where and when advising services are available to adults				
Off-campus	41	35	11	.23
During the evening	87	66	30	.37
Weekends	35	15	7	.26
Provides career advising for adults	98	94	70	.32

*N varies slightly from question to question depending on number of omits.

A chi-square analysis looking at the relationship between institutional type and advising services was also performed (see Table 5). Congruent with the findings discussed earlier, two-year public colleges were found to be the institutional type most likely to have special advising services for adults (72%), they tended to spend more time advising adults than other colleges (56 percent of respondents spent more than 50 percent of their time advising adults) and were most likely to be found off-campus advising (44%). Although over 50 percent of the graduate public and graduate private institutions offered special advising services for adults, they spent less time advising adults. Additionally, they were less likely to offer advising services at off-campus locations. The four-year private college respondents also tended not to devote as much of their time to advising adults (64 percent of those responding spent less than 24 percent) and were the least likely to offer advising services outside regular office hours. Weekend advising was seldom made available by any of the institutions.

Table 5

*Relationship between Institutional Type and Advising Services
(in Percentages).*

	Type of Institution*				Cont. Coef.
	2-Year Public (N=25)	4-Year Private (N=28)	Grad Public (N=104-108)	Grad Private (N=39-40)	
<i>Advising Service</i>					
Special advising services for adults	72	32	53	59	.21
Time spent with adults					
100%-50%	56	18	19	30	
49%-25%	36	18	17	23	
24% or less	8	64	64	48	.35
Where and when advising services are available to adults					
Off-campus	44	21	32	25	NS
During the evening	88	39	57	68	.26
Weekends	12	25	13	25	NS
Provides career advising for adults	100	79	91	82	.20

*N varies slightly from question to question depending on number of omits.

CONCLUSIONS

The most striking finding of this adult learner services study is that there appears to be a direct correlation between administrative support and the services offered to non-traditional learners. The higher the level of support by administration, the more programs that were available for adults. Interestingly, however, few institutions, regardless of their administrations' encouragement, reported having adult resource centers or special scholarships/financial aid for adults. The services most accessible to adults tended to be those which could be provided without requiring major organizational changes (such as academic advising and counseling) and continued to be offered at times convenient to the institution (during the day). Educational delivery systems also tended to be those which could be provided through a mere extension of existing courses (evening courses). Although it was encouraging to note that 70 percent of those responding indicated that their institutions had altered their program offerings to accommodate the needs of older students, these changes appeared to be only superficial.

It was not surprising to find that adult women students are the most targeted group for program planning. Epstein (1986) indicates that the majority of all American college students are women. Studies have found that adult women have a greater need for services than do their male counterparts (Hughes, 1983). Hughes postulates that this is because women often face more responsibilities (housework and childcare in addition to jobs) than do their adult male student counterparts and need assistance in coping with their multiple roles. Perhaps, also, women are more willing to admit their needs and take advantage of programs that address their concerns.

As expected, two-year public colleges were found to offer more services for adults than do other types of institutions. They are most likely to offer refresher courses and support groups and to have an adult resource center. Services are available at more times (evenings and weekends) at the two-year colleges. These colleges were also more likely to provide assistance in off-campus locations as well. As institutions which have been dependent on the traditional-aged student see a decline in enrollment, it is likely many of the institutional barriers will be removed so as to attract adult learners.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Since academic advising is the student service most frequently extended to adult students, it is essential that advisors serve as advocates for adult learner services on their campuses. They can influence their institutions to move toward an equity stage of development. Ackell, et al. (1982), list key areas which should be considered in this process. Among them "... courses must be scheduled in times and places, including evenings, weekends, and off-campus locations, where adult students can get to them, and yet where there is no diminution of academic quality or credibility" (p.34). They also recommend extending the operating hours of offices that serve adult students and adapting institutional rules and regulations to meet the needs of adults. Ackell, et al., point out, however, that various stages of the adaptive process will be appropriate for individual institutions at certain times in their history. But as more adults enter our colleges and universities, more institutions of higher learning will find it

necessary to accommodate the needs of this new group of learners. This accommodation can no longer be a mere extension of services within the existing traditional patterns as seen in this study. The market for serious adult students is large, growing, and significant for any college seeking to maintain or to expand enrollment in the coming decade. Adult students should, however, be viewed not as a student commodity to fill the gap left by decreasing numbers of traditional-aged students, but as an integral part of the university environment.

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