

NACADA AND ITS COMMITMENT TO ADULT LEARNERS

Cheryl J. Polson, guest editor for the special "Adult Learner" section of this issue of the Journal, is an assistant professor holding graduate faculty status in the College of Education at Kansas State University, where she teaches graduate and undergraduate courses in the Department of Adult and Continuing Education. At Kansas State, Cheryl had also been coordinator of the Non-traditional Study Program and then the director of the Advising and Career Counseling Center in the Department of Family and Child Development. Cheryl received her B.S. in Home Economics, with emphasis in Family and Child Development; her M.S. in Family and Child Development, with concentration in Counseling; and her Ph.D. in Higher Education Administration/Student Personnel Services — all from Kansas State University. She has since pursued postdoctoral coursework at the University of Missouri — Kansas City, Department of Curriculum and Instruction, with an emphasis in Adult Education. Cheryl's activities with NACADA in recent years include the following: vice president for programs; member, board of directors; editorial board, NACADA Journal; chair, national conference; chair, Research Committee; and chair, Commission on Adult Learners, her current position. Also a member of the American College Personnel Association (ACPA), Cheryl is associated with Commission XVII (Commuter Programs); she is a Directorate member and is chair of the Adult Student Task Force. In addition to NACADA and ACPA, Cheryl is affiliated with the American Association for Counseling and Development, the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning, the Missouri Valley Adult Education Association, the Kansas Adult Education Association, and the Kansas Foundation for Partnerships in Education. Cheryl has made numerous presentations and written over two dozen articles, most of them on the subject of the adult learner.

The National Academic Advising Association (NACADA) has always been committed to serving its membership. The Association's response to the professional needs of the diverse clientele found within academic advising continues to be impressive and has contributed to NACADA's rapid growth. Unencumbered by layers of bureaucracy, NACADA has had the flexibility and openness in attitude to truly serve its members. Perhaps this is best illustrated through a review of the history of the Commission on Advising Adult Learners.

At the **1984** National NACADA Conference, professionals working with adults in higher education expressed frustration at the lack of a professional organization that would meet their specific needs. Although institutions had begun to acknowledge the adult students on their campuses, professional organizations offered limited assistance to those designated to serve this special population. Throughout the **1984** conference program, sessions with the word "adult" in the title were attended by virtually all the same individuals. During one such session, the possibility of forming an organizational unit within NACADA to serve this membership's needs was suggested. Dr. Charles W. Connell, president of NACADA during that period, suggested the formation of a Task Force on Advising Adult Learners. This action and subse-

quent board support encouraged NACADA to be THE organization that took the lead in offering professional development opportunities for individuals responsible for working with adult learners in higher education.

During the first meeting of the Task Force in 1985, it was decided that the primary goal of the group was to make advisors aware of the adult learner's special needs. Central to this group's goal was defining the "adult learner." The following definition was offered:

(The adult learner) is a high school graduate or holder of a GED and who has been away from formal education for at least two years. The person may hold either a full-time or part-time job, have established his/her own home, and assumed roles other than that of student. [The adult learner] is often a part-time learner since education is often not his/her primary concern (Polson, et al., 1986).

A second major effort was the development of a bibliography of literature that would be useful to advisors of adult students. This twenty-two-page bibliography was included in a Task Force Report distributed to the members in 1986. The Task Force Report has been reprinted several times and continues to be one of NACADA's most popular publications. This report also includes the results of a survey conducted by the Task Force to determine the scope of existing services for adult learners currently attending universities and colleges. Items included in the questionnaire assessed such things as institutional support for adult learner services, existing services for this student population, special target groups identified, and institutional barriers confronted by adult learners on campus. An article by Polson and Eriksen entitled, "Impact of Administrative Support and Institutional Type on Services for Adult Learners," was also based on this research and was published in the *NACADA Journal* (8:2). Task Force efforts have continued with a major emphasis on programming at the national conferences. An adult learner track has been featured at each national conference since the group's formation.

With the Task Force membership increasing each year, it became apparent that this group should not be viewed as temporary, as the term "task force" implies. In October 1988, the Board of Directors of NACADA once again reflected a sense of vision and voted to create a Commission on Advising Adult Learners. NACADA confirmed its commitment to assisting professionals whose primary efforts are directed at meeting the needs of adult learners. In many organizations the units designed to serve such professionals are often temporary and viewed only as peripheral to the organization's mission.

Further documentation of the organization's commitment was the decision to have a special section of this *Journal* issue devoted to information on adult learners. As Chair of the Commission on Advising Adult Learners, I coordinated the efforts to present material that can assist advisors as they work with adult learners on their campuses. Special editorial board members with an expertise in this area were selected to assist in the review of articles submitted for this issue. They included:

- Carol Ryan—Metropolitan State University
- Jan Eriksen—Ohio State University
- Barbara Copland—Pennsylvania State University—Shenango Campus
- Patricia Boaz—Indianapolis University, Purdue University at Indianapolis

These individuals not only reviewed manuscripts, but provided reviews of the most recently published books pertaining to serving adult learners in higher education. Three articles have been selected for inclusion in this *Journal* issue, each of which should challenge advisors to

examine their roles vis-à-vis adult learners. Also included is an extensive, current bibliography that can assist advisors in their own self-directed learning efforts. This bibliography is an update of the one originally presented in the 1986 Task Force Report. Jan Ericksen at Ohio State University and Genevra Mann at Youngstown State University assisted in updating the bibliography. It is hoped that this will be an invaluable resource as advisors investigate how advising concerns of adults are divergent from those of the younger, once traditional-aged student.

The decade of the nineties promises to be a decade of diversity for academic advising. Adult learners will not be the only student population demanding a new, or perhaps expanded, understanding by advisors. It is, however, a population that will require more institutional alterations and, perhaps, more advisor intervention. It is imperative that advisors extend their roles so that this population may be better served. The resources included in this special adult learner section should allow readers to understand the adaptations needed for, and the concerns of, adult students as they enter or re-enter the higher education environment.

