

ADULT LEARNERS

Characteristics, Concerns, and Challenges to Higher Education

A Bibliography*

INTRODUCTION

As early as the seventies, institutions of higher education were alerted that a demographic revolution would drastically alter the composition of their student population (Carlson, 1977; Gilford, 1975; Graulich, 1977; Hodgkinson, 1976, 1983, 1985). Harrington's (1977) book begins by noting that higher education "can never again be described as exclusively the province of the young." Despite the fact that these predictions have become a reality, higher education has not uniformly responded to the challenges of effectively integrating adult students into the system.

Ackell, Epps, Sharp, and Sparks (1982) conceptualize the institutional process of adaptation and change needed to accommodate the adult learners as a three-stage developmental process. Many campuses are at the first stage — the **laissez-faire stage**. At this stage, adults are allowed to do the best they can within a system that works neither for them nor against them. The second stage is the **separatist stage**. Institutions which fall into this category tend to provide services and programs exclusively for adult learners. It is not uncommon for these offerings to be given a lower institutional priority than those geared toward the traditional student. Institutions that have smoothly integrated adults into their environments are in the final developmental stage — **equity**. All students, regardless of age, are provided the same quality and quantity of services. It is this stage that the authors suggest will ultimately be best for all learners within a given institution. Many institutions have moved into this stage not necessarily for altruistic reasons, but for institutional survival.

The increase in older students coupled with a diminution of traditional-aged students has made understanding the identity and motivations of this population absolutely critical. Schlossberg, Lynch, and Chickering (1989) argue that the demographic revolution will create an education revolution. They suggest that professionals involved in higher education will be forced to "revolutionize" their work:

To deal effectively with the older students will require understanding of their motives, the realities they face, and their orientations toward family, work, and citizenship. It will also require understanding what competence and knowledge they seek and the ways in which they can learn (1989, p. xiii).

* This Bibliography was part of the report prepared in 1986 by NACADA's Task Force on Advising Adult Learners.

This task is complicated by the broad range of terms and classifications used to describe adults who desire to further their education. Attempts to define the older student have led to ever-increasing ambiguity. Terms such as non-traditional student, re-entry student, stop-outs, older students, adult learners, and returning students have been used. The lack of a uniform definition and inconsistencies in terminology have made it difficult to access relevant information. These problems are compounded by the fact that much of the literature is dispersed throughout a variety of outlets with no central source to which individuals can turn for a comprehensive overview. The fact that, in addition to student services providers, individuals from a variety of academic disciplines are also addressing adult learner issues in discipline-specific journals exacerbates the situation.

To assist readers in accessing information on adult learners, a current, extensive bibliography follows. Citations come from over 40 professional journals, as well as from authors who express a rich diversity of views. As is evidenced by the length of the review, much has been written on the topic. It was not until adult students began to emerge in larger numbers, however, that the literature reflected a concern for this group of learners. For example, the current bibliography includes only 211 references of articles and books written prior to 1979. From 1979 through August of 1989, 664 references were identified. Although some of the disparity in numbers can be attributed to the fact that the bibliography was not begun in 1985, it perhaps more accurately reflects the fact that the topic has been one of major concern to higher education only in recent years.

References annotated in Penn and Weaver's (1979) article will provide interested readers with key literature written throughout the 1960s and early 1970s. Hughes's (1983) synthesis organizes publications of the latter 1970s and early 1980s into several key areas: characteristics of non-traditional versus traditional students; personal/social development needs; academic preparation needs; and instructional preferences of adults. Individuals seeking the most recent perspectives on serving adult learners will find over 400 references published in the past five years.

It is imperative that readers recognize that there is no ideal solution to serving all adults on all campuses. Contained within this bibliography are a number of models for effectively addressing the concerns of adult students. Models that proved effective in one institution may or may not be transferable to others. The literature can suggest clues or hypotheses that can help guide the design of unique and creative responses from individual institutions. Characteristics such as institutional mission, existing resources and services, and faculty and staff must be considered in the final plan.

In many instances, the responsibility for creating an environment responsive to adult learners will begin with the academic advisor. Since institutional change often comes slowly to higher education, advisors will often be called upon to fill the void until broader change can be implemented. They will do this more successfully if they thoroughly understand the characteristics, concerns, and challenges of adults in higher education.