

ADULT STUDENTS:

A PRIORITY REVISITED

By Sandy Shugart

When I began my career as a senior staff member in higher education back in the early 1980s, the adult learner was all the rage. The innovation-based economy, the “up-skilling” of nearly every occupation by technology, the need to retrain periodically for several careers in a lifetime, and the predicted dearth of traditional-aged students were accepted as axiomatic and fundamental forces shaping the future of higher education. Now, nearly 30 years later, it seems timely to ask several questions about the way these things have, in fact, developed, how we in higher education have adapted, and how these issues and others may shape our approaches to mature students going forward.

Photo courtesy of Don Burlinson

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Adult Students: 1985 to 2005

Many practices in higher education evolved significantly during this period. The presence of adult degree completion programs in colleges and universities of all types proliferated, with satellite campuses for this purpose in metropolitan areas often far removed from the “home campus.” MBA programs multiplied during this same time, as did online learning models. There also was a near explosion of for-profit colleges offering degree programs at all levels, especially bachelor’s and advanced degree programs, and pursuing an active agenda of deregulation to facilitate their work. Perhaps most notably, the community college movement came into its own during this period, serving more than half of all higher education students with a broader profile than at any time in their history.

So, with these and other developments within our organizations, has the level

and mode of participation of adult students changed in this 20-year period? The answer, like so many in our work is, “Yes, but . . .” During this time, the percentage of the population aged 18 to 19 who were enrolled in higher education grew from 40.4 percent to 49.3 percent, a solid increase in penetration of this age group. Meanwhile, the percentage of the population aged 20 to 24 enrolled in higher education increased from 24.0 percent to 36.1 percent, a similar and robust rate of increase. However, for adults aged 25 to 29, the percentage enrolled grew from only 9.2 percent to 11.9 percent, and for those aged 30 to 34, the increase over 20 years was a mere 6.1 percent to 6.9 percent enrolled.¹

These data suggest that the burgeoning adult higher education population has never fully materialized, at least not in formal institutions. The effect of the “new traditional student,” who works while schooling, takes a lighter course load, lives away from campus, changes institutions one or more times before attaining a degree, and takes more than four years to complete a bachelor’s degree (or more than two to complete an associate degree), is clearly visible in the growth of the 20- to 24-year-old group.

It isn’t surprising, then, that a 2007 policy paper called *Adult Learners in Higher Education*, commissioned by the Department of Labor and written

by Jobs for the Future, concluded that “traditional higher education programs and policies—created in an era when the 18- to 22-year-old, dependent, full-time student coming right out of high school was seen as a core market for higher education—are not well-designed for the needs of adult learners, most of whom are ‘employees who study’ rather than ‘students who work.’”

Leading among the various sectors of higher education in offering a scalable response to mature students is the community college, serving 45 percent of all undergraduates, and nearly two-thirds of the highly nontraditional students under discussion here. Even the private, for-profit sector—with all of its growth—manages to serve just 5 percent of all undergraduates and less than 7 percent of the highly nontraditional students.² But those of us working the community college arena will be the first to

say that while access to these programs remains high, their yield remains troublingly low, likely a reflection of our continuing challenge to adapt to the needs of such a broad range of learners.

What Next?

If the dramatic growth of mature students in higher education predicted so long ago has only partially materialized, and if our institutions remain poorly adapted to their needs, as some suggest, what lies ahead? Should we rethink the assumptions concerning mature students? Will they become important to our colleges and universities for reasons of mission and national strategy? Will they matter to our business models?

I suggest that the real trend-setting (or perhaps trend-breaking) growth in the presence of adult, mature students in higher education is yet to be fulfilled, but remains clearly visible on this side of the horizon. We may manage, with unenlightened policies and perspectives, to delay the future growth of this group for a while longer, but not indefinitely. This is because of two important imperatives, one a matter of business—our business—and the other a matter of policy.

The Business Imperative. Perhaps the more apt label here would really be “market imperative.” The market

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in which nonprofit institutions of higher education have flourished, growing enrollment and selectivity even while raising tuition at something north of twice the rate of inflation, is changing. First, our primary market, recent high school graduates, is expected over the next decade or more to grow at about half the rate we've been accustomed to seeing for the past 20 years. Between 1990–91 and 2002–03, the total number of high school graduates increased by some 21 percent; for the next 12 years, it is expected to grow by only 6 percent. However, even this is misleading, as nearly all of this growth is predicted to be concentrated in a few states, with many more showing declining numbers of high school graduates during this time.³ Generally, the numbers of traditional students available for recruitment will decline in the Northeast and Midwest, where the traditional institutions tend to be concentrated, and grow in the West and South, where there may be a shortage of supply in higher education. Florida, for example, is clearly under-built to serve projected student demand and without some clever policy making, may squeeze out large numbers of traditional and nontraditional students. As these trends play out, traditional colleges will feel a contraction in the traditional student market and begin, I expect and hope, to look toward mature students for more than a few “cash cow” programs and consider them central to the institution's mission and vitality.

The Policy Imperative. I dare to hope this because of this second imperative. Our workforce—and in fact *every* workforce in the Western world—is in trouble. The cause is as simple as life itself. One of the many seismic changes traceable to the baby boom is the enormous imbalance in the workforce created by the expected retirement of many in this generation during this decade and a bit beyond. Without summoning all of the statistical arguments here, I can simply say that large numbers of retiring educated workers are being replaced with insufficiently large numbers of under-educated workers. The result is and will be pervasive shortages of educated and skilled workers in nearly every profession and craft, so much so that availability of an ample supply of well-educated workers will trump almost every other variable in the attraction of new, high-value jobs to both existing and emerging economic centers of the world. Off-shoring is as much a response to skill shortages as to wage differences. How will employers respond when CPAs are in shortage, just as RNs are today?

Think of workforce (and education) as the rate-determining step in the new economic formula, replacing earlier rate-determining variables such as capital, access to markets, cost of labor, and availability of technology, for which globalization has leveled

Ready or Not, Here They Come

By Preston Pulliams



Portland Community College (PCC), the largest postsecondary institution in Oregon, serving approximately 86,700 students, is actively bracing for and embracing a demographic tsunami. It is the impending wave of increased student numbers, an aging student body, and a statewide shortage of workers.

This same conundrum faces community colleges and their presidents all across the nation. In this equation, a workforce shortage, such as exists in nursing, is divided by an aging workforce and multiplied by an ever-changing economy. Add to that such variables as jobs that haven't been invented yet and technology we can't even imagine. What this equation mandates is responsiveness and barrier-free access. Access for older adults is especially needed as the baby boom generation begins to retire.

Higher education is not the only sector that will feel the effects of an aging population. As older workers

retire, their employers will lose many skills, as well as the institutional histories that are safeguarded by these employees. To keep a full talent pool, employers must retain and re-engage older workers in the workforce. Businesses should plan for the succession of older workers and determine how their knowledge can be transferred to younger workers. Many companies are starting to recognize this by developing strategies for continuing to employ older workers, such as identifying workers eligible to retire in coming years, deciding which younger workers should replace them, and mentoring those individuals appropriately.

In some industries, the mass retirements of aging workers could trigger labor shortages, premature promotions for younger and less-experienced workers, and the disappearance of valuable institutional knowledge. Companies that have not yet addressed this issue face the possibility of having to plug holes as their most-experienced workers begin to retire.

Our focus at PCC is both to assist aging workers and to address workforce demands by assembling stakeholders

the playing field. This simple fact is driving much of the European Union's strenuous efforts to "massify" higher education as a key economic strategy.

We in the United States will thus need to address deep workforce shortages with a slowly growing or declining (depending upon your region) supply of traditional students. Here, adult, mature students offer our best chance at a successful response, if we can enroll them in much greater numbers and achieve much more consistently positive results in the completion of their education.

Issues and Opportunities

Much is being written about adapting our higher education systems more effectively to mature students. A few of the more intriguing issues fall under the headings of *policy*, *practice*, and *culture*.

The policy implications are in many ways the easiest to identify, but the most difficult to unravel. For example, it is clear that financial aid models need to change. Simply accommodating more part-time students would help. But how does one engage merit-based programs for students who have been out of formal schooling for years? And if the policy objective in these reforms is to increase skill in the workforce, not just enrollment in institutions that are particularly good at administering aid, the basis of allocation may need to be revisited.

Here the plot thickens, as there are many competing (and sometimes oddly allied) interests in financial aid policy. One might, for instance, raise questions about the allocation of aid to for-profit colleges, which enroll less than 10 percent of students, but consume nearly 40 percent of federal aid dollars.⁴ But even raising the question creates acrimonious debate and strange bedfellows who might see the discussion as eventually coming around to challenge their business models, as well. Ultimately, topics like national accreditation make their way into the discussion and the whole dialogue breaks into one of narrow, segmented interests. Nevertheless, a robust dialogue is needed on these and other issues, with the recent report of the U.S. Department of Labor serving as a useful beginning point.

Looking at practice, the issues are more malleable, as they are, presumably, under more local control. But institutional culture can be as obdurate as federal policy. For example, in most large universities, there is scarcely a department with less prestige and access to resources and influence than the one to which nontraditional learners are generally relegated: continuing education. The more influential departments with an interest in mature students usually manage to create separate silos for their programs (e.g., the MBA) to protect their brand, leaving the rest of the institution with no real impetus

from business, civic organizations, education, and government to eliminate the barriers faced by older workers and alter workplace attitudes about this population.

Nationally, the picture is not rosy. Just 12 percent of employers have even analyzed demographics that show the workforce to be rapidly aging, according to a national study recently conducted by Boston College's Center on Aging & Work.¹ About 26 percent of the survey's 578 responding employers indicated they have done nothing to examine the issue, with the majority being mildly aware that as the population ages, the workforce shrinks.

Government must confront the facts, as well. Essential to addressing workforce needs and retraining an aging population is engaging legislative leadership to help make higher education more accessible by providing financial support and other incentives to adults who want to sharpen their skills by pursuing further education.

For our part, community colleges can provide some leadership to this national challenge. We are adept at assessing demographic changes and developing and implementing need-based programs in a responsive and

timely manner. Historically, community colleges have offered the most affordable route to higher education. In addition, our close relationships with business and industry and our record of flexibility and responsiveness result in training that is highly relevant to the workforce—both today's and tomorrow's. We are confident that we can meet workforce and demographic demands, and provide leadership in maximizing access for all students in the coming decades. The time to prepare for the surge in older adults is now—because ready or not, here they come. ■

Note:

1. Boston College, The Center on Aging & Work. (2007, March). National study of business strategy and workforce development. *Research Highlights*, 4, p. 3. See http://agingandwork.bc.edu/documents/RH04_NationalStudy_03-07_004.pdf.

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Reinvesting in Older Adults: The Challenge for Higher Ed

What keeps older adults out of higher education? According to ACE's recently released report *Framing New Terrain: Older Adults and Higher Education*, several demographic, attitudinal, and structural factors emerge as barriers for this population. These factors include:

- Lack of effective outreach to older adults for whom postsecondary education has not been an option or a benefit.
- Age and its accompanying responsibilities, especially for people in their 50s and early 60s who have multiple work and family obligations.
- Lack of transportation, support services, and financing, which in particular keeps minorities and adults with low incomes out of the classroom.
- Ageism, which exists not only in the workplace, but also on college campuses.

(For more information on these obstacles, the changing demographics of older adults, and their motivations for participating in higher education, download a PDF of the full report at www.acenet.edu/cill/reinvesting.)

Framing New Terrain is the first report from Reinvesting in the Third Age: Older Adults and Higher Education, ACE's two-year research project on adults aged 55 to 79, funded by MetLife Foundation. Project goals include increasing awareness in the higher education community about the lifelong learning needs and expectations of older adults, and disseminating best practices and policies emerging from higher education and in various regions throughout the country. ■

to think through and change the cultures that have kept us focused on traditional students all these years. Clearly, the coming of age of online learning is likely to be a watershed in this work for working adults, but this doesn't mitigate the need for the rest of the college to rethink the way students are treated at every stage of the process. Here, of course, some serious meddling is needed, as well. Simply building course schedules that accommodate the needs of students—any students—rather than those of staff and faculty is still frontier work at many institutions. Imagine a college that schedules faculty creatively so that working students have access to many of the best teachers and mentors at the college, not just those who were recruited to teach outside the golden hours, Monday through Thursday.

Finally, and most interestingly I think, is the matter of culture. The academic culture, our habits of working and thinking, shaped by centuries of practice, still imagines learning to be the primary, if not the sole vocation of the student. It still imagines the course of study as a linear process played out almost exclusively in one place. It still struggles with deep confusion over underlying metaphors—are students “raw material,” “product,” “customers,” or “partners” of the institution? And it still conserves the deep architecture of institutions and the refractory interests of internal constituents, often at the expense of those we serve.

There is reason to believe that success with adult students will necessitate important modifications of this architecture: lengths of terms, modes of delivery, the role of assessment, the allocation

of teaching talent to learners' needs, project-based learning—in short, a model of adult teaching and learning that adds value to and respects the heuristic skills of these learners. Our institutions will have to adapt to many new realities if we are to avoid looking back 30 years from now with the embarrassment of admitting, not that we were wrong in our analysis of the trends, but that we were impotent to shape and direct our own work. ■

Notes:

1. U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (2007). *The condition of education 2007*. NCES 2007-064. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office. See <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2007064>.
2. Employment and Training Administration, U.S. Department of Labor. (2007). *Adult learners in higher education: Barriers to success and strategies to improve results*. Occasional Paper 2007-03. www.jff.org/Documents/adultlearners.dol.pdf.
3. Hussar, W. J., & Bailey, T. M. (2006). *Projections of educational statistics to 2015. Section 3. High school graduates: State and regional*. NCES 2006-084. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office. See <http://nces.ed.gov/programs/projections/sec3c.asp>.
4. U.S. Government Accountability Office. (2005). *Report to congressional requesters: Transfer students: Postsecondary institutions could promote more consistent consideration of coursework by not basing on accreditation*. GAO-06-22. See www.gao.gov/new.items/d0622.pdf.

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