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Understanding and Responding to the Needs of Nontraditional College Students

By Joyce Hickson

The statistical profile of today’s American college student indicates that this sector is overwhelmingly “nontraditional”. The nontraditional student possesses at least one or more of the following characteristics: married; a parent; 25 years or older; returning to college after having been out of school for a number of years; financially independent from parents; attending school on a part-time basis (U. S. Department of Education, 2002).

According to the Columbus State University Fall, 2002 Enrollment Report (Wallman, 2002) the average age of undergraduate students is 25 years, while the graduate student mean age is 37 years. Additionally, large numbers of CSU students attend college part-time and hold jobs, mirroring the national profile of higher education students. As Green & Greene (2002) note,

“Three-quarters of all college students in America are not high school graduates under the age of 23 who head off to school directly after graduation, remain dependent upon their parents, have no children, and attend full time (p. 23).”

The Georgia Board of Regents Goals Statement (May 24, 2002) recognizes the importance of responding to the needs of nontraditional students and asserts that “the University System of Georgia will ensure access to academic excellence and education opportunities for all Georgians. This will be accomplished by:

“Expanding participation by increasing access while maintaining quality, enhancing diversity, focusing on the needs of nontraditional students, increasing distance education opportunities, advancing public library usage, and marketing the advantages of postsecondary education to all Georgians” (University System of Georgia Board of Regents).

This paper discusses educational programming needs, retention issues, and recommendations for responding to the needs of nontraditional students by adapting the institutional environment.

Educational Programming Needs

According to Stellenpohl and Shipton (1986) “postsecondary institutions have been among the slowest of all social institutions to respond to the needs of the adult learner” (p. 647). Unfortunately, many older students experience static, impersonal, and indifferent academic bureaucracies unresponsive to the needs of adult clientele. Of particular relevance is the need for new models of instruction and alternative delivery systems.
Nontraditional students are consumer-oriented. They see education as an investment, particularly with respect to career opportunities. The adult student has greater and varied past experiences and is more concerned with practical, rather than theoretical, application (Schlossberg, Lynch, and Chickering, 1989). In the classroom adult students learn by relating new, unfamiliar information to things they already know. Because they have had many life experiences they have more “ pegs” on which to hang new information. Studies indicate that they are problem-solvers who would benefit from problem based learning approaches. Group work and collaborative learning activities have also been found to be effective, and studies indicate these approaches influence attitudes toward learning and student persistence (Cooper and Robinson, 1998).

Those nontraditional students who have been out of school for a substantial period of time, may benefit from optional learning experiences that help refresh skills may be needed. Because the adult learner is self-directed, he/she tends to bring a life centered, self-motivation, and a task orientation to the learning situation. Preferences in educational programming were found for the nontraditional learner that includes: distance education (Internet, pre-recorded television or audio, and/or live Television or audio) (U. S. Department of Education, 2000); evening and weekend classes; extended lab and library hours; university faculty with expertise in adult student needs (McKeachie, 1998); comfortable classroom furniture (Quinean, 1990). The studies listed above indicate that adult students express a strong preference for interactive, contextual, and facilitative learning.

Retention Issues

Nontraditional students who enter postsecondary education seeking a degree are, in fact, less likely than traditional students to attain a degree or remain enrolled after five years (Horn, 2002). Persistence could be influenced by financial difficulties due to financial obligations such as housing payments, child care costs, etc. Additionally, responsibilities to work, family, and studying may create stress overload. The educational institution itself may not be responsive in helping the adult learner make a successful transition to college and nontraditional students may not become integrated into the full campus community. Adult students may need help in building their self-confidence, in refreshing study skills, and in managing their time and resources while in school. Such students may need alternatives to dropping out such as independent study, contract learning, and financial aid that includes flexible payment plans. Greene & Greene (2002) reported the following “risk attributes” that have been determined to be negatively related to persistence and degree attainment: delayed enrollment by one or more years; part-time enrollment; financial independent; having children or dependents; single parenthood; working full-time; having a GED or dropping out of high school.

Greene & Greene (2002) further commented, “If we have to choose one word and one strategy that matters most for retention, it is counseling” (p. 22). Nontraditional students also may find mentoring by successful adult students useful while special attention must be paid to advising as well.

To increase nontraditional student persistence action strategies could include involvement and experiences with faculty outside the classroom, hands
on learning experiences, peer associations and small reference groups to assure integration into campus life. Additionally, Muston (1984) has recommended the following action strategies: access to adequate academic support; a personal mentor; effective academic advising; assistance to meet financial obligations; assessment of student needs through exit surveys and student satisfaction inventories; information on the special characteristics of those who do persist.

References


Dr. Joyce Hickson is a Professor in the Department of Counseling, Educational Leadership and Professional Studies. During the current academic year she assisted the Division of Enrollment Management in developing a strategic plan to recruit non-traditional students and improve services to this sector.