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Adult Entrances and Exits: What Does Retention Literature Inform us About Urban Adult Higher Educational Participants and Student Success?

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Abstract: This research purpose, derived from a larger study shares findings which help explain retention and, success outcomes associated with urban adult learners in a 4-year higher educational setting. A critical analysis of the literature reveals in retention, understanding barriers is a key Indicator of an institution's effectiveness.

Keywords: urban, adult participation, higher education, retention, barriers

Retention and persistence are related concepts, but with different meanings. Retention is the ability of an institution to retain students from admission until graduation. Persistence refers to students' ability to persist year after year to graduation (Berger, Ramirez and Lyons, 2012). In the early decades of higher education, retention and persistence was of little significance. There were very few students enrolling in college, and earning a degree was not of great importance in early American society (Seidman, 2012).

The aim of the university at that time was to prepare men for the ministry (Berger et al, 2012). American higher education experienced rapid growth throughout the 1800's and in the nineteenth century there were noticeable increases in the number of earned degrees (Braxton, 2014). Given this early history, retention continues to be a very real concern and is a major policy issue in higher education (Berger et al., 2012). Many if not all colleges are committed to the successful completion of this students with retention serving as a key indicator of an institution's effectiveness.

There is a diverse body of research examining the journey of the nontraditional adult students as they navigate through higher education. Adult students have been described over and over in the literature (Kasworm, 2012; Hardin, 2008; Merriam & Caferrella, 2007; Donaldson & Townsend, 2007). It is well established that adult students come into higher education with many at-risk factors such as; age, working full or part-time jobs, dependents, and being academically unprepared, to name a few. These characteristics have proven to be barriers to success for some adult students. On the other hand, regardless of these at-risk factors many adult students continue to enroll and persist in post-secondary education. Colleges and universities have been challenged to ask, what they can do to contribute to the success of this population. Some have answered the call by implementing initiatives such as, child care, evening classes, on-line and distance learning. However, to really assist adult students, colleges and universities must ask, what motivates them to apply, enroll and persist? Also, in what ways can they not only provide external supports but also how can they add value to the adult student experience throughout their academic journey?

A review of adult college students in the higher education research is necessary because it serves as a caution for researchers to remember that the language used to talk about adults in higher education is important, for it not only reflects our thinking but also contributes to a construction of reality (Gumport, 2001). The adult student population has been on a steady increase over the past few decades and show no signs of slowing (Kasworm, 2012; NCES 2011). However, before adult student retention can be measured across institutions there needs to be an

agreed upon definition of adult student retention and what counts as adult retention. The majority of adult students are not enrolled full-time, they may have transfer credit, work experience and/or military training. Many adults may also stop and start their enrollment making it difficult to measure them by the same metric used for traditional students (Tilgham, 2012; McCann & Laitinen, 2014). This critical review of the literature reveals that there are no easy answers to the retention problem, however, if we continue to dialogue and work on the positives, as unfolded in the literature, perhaps we can limit the adult exits and enhance retention and success of urban adult participants in higher education today, as adult urban students are an integral part of the fabric of higher education in the 21st century.

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