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Can I Do Both? Be Employed and Graduate?

Adult Non-Traditional Learners Who Combine Employment and Higher Education Enrollment-A Look at Persistence and Best Practices to Overcoming Barriers to Improve Success and Retention

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Keywords: non-traditional, persistence, retention, employment, higher education

Abstract: The roundtable discussion critically analyzes two significant research studies on barriers to persistence of non-traditional adult learners who combine employment and higher education enrollment. These studies were conducted by the U.S. Department of Education in partnership with the NCES. Implications for best practices to overcome barriers, improve retention and academic success will be covered.

Employment and Higher Education Enrollment among Non-traditional Adult Learners

The roundtable proposal critically analyzes two significant research studies conducted by the U.S. Department of Education in partnership with the National Center for Education Statistics and the advocacy study in partnership with Eduventures and FutureWorks respectively. Both studies examine the characteristics and educational experiences of 43% of working adult undergraduates over 24 engaged in postsecondary education during the academic years of 1999-2000 (Berker, Carroll & Horn, 2003). Berker et al. (2003) study focused on adult beginning students, and analyzed the differences in 6 year rates of persistence between two distinct categories: employees who study- (EWW) and students who work-(SWW).

These authors examined the research questions: (1) How do the demographic characteristics of students who identify themselves as employees who study differ from those who identify themselves as students who work? (2) How do the employment and attendance patterns of these two groups of students differ? (3) How do employees who study and students who work differ in where they enroll and what they study? (4) How successful are the two groups in completing their postsecondary programs of study? (Berker, Carroll & Horn, 2003, p. 3). The participants of this study comprised of a longitudinal cohort of all students who originated postsecondary education in the year 1995-1996, surveyed in 2001, about 6 years after their initial enrollment (BPS:96/01).

The purpose of Kazis et al.'s (2007) study was to provide a comprehensive overview of the challenges encountered by non-traditional adult learners in higher education. The population sample represented the perspectives of the seven million adults over the age of 25 enrolled in two and four year higher education institutions. The paradigm shift from traditional learners to the emergence of non-traditional learners were discussed and its irrelevance and inadequacy to meet the needs of today's adult non-traditional learners. Adult learners over the age of 24 in higher education compose about 44% of U.S postsecondary student (Kazis et al., 2007). However, current public policies target the needs of the traditional student instead of the non-traditional learner in terms of financial aid policies, accessibility and matriculation mandates. Given this significant change in the economic landscape and its impact on the workplace, non-traditional

adult learners must seek additional training and academic degrees to remain marketable and maintain their competitive advantage (Kazis et al., 2007).

Overcoming Barriers to improve Persistence and Retention

Barriers for non-traditional adult learners according to Kazis et al., (2007) consists of : (1) competing responsibilities often including children, spouses, full-time or part-time jobs, late return to school (2) lower postsecondary persistence and completion rates than traditional students”(Kazis et al., p. 2) (3) Increased college costs and lack of financial aid opportunities that support their half-time status (4) Program structure and duration of degree matriculation is incongruent with adult learners needs (5) Pedagogy vs. Andragogy - curriculum, experiential practice and integration of background to meet the needs of adult learners are incongruent institutional academic credit systems that impede transfer credits for adult learners (Kazis et al., 2007). Solutions to overcoming these barriers include: (a)Higher education institutions that offer flexible, accelerated degree programs (b)technical degrees and industry certifications often cater to the non-traditional adult learner (c)community colleges and for-profit institutions have increased in offerings such as evening courses, available after-hours staff and distance learning initiatives (Kazis et al., 2007).

Lastly, implications for best practices include expanding student services that are all-inclusive. Student services must be adaptable and meet the needs of non-traditional adult learners. These support programs include flexible hours for financial aid offices and other programs services, distant learning modalities, dedicated academic advisors and recognition of adult learners’ background and experiences to incorporate them not only into the classroom but possible transfer credit opportunities. If non-traditional students’ needs are not addressed the economic consequences are detrimental to the success, persistence and retention of this population.

References

Berker, A., Horn, L., & Carroll, D., (2003). Adult undergraduates who combine employment and postsecondary enrollment, US Department of Education Postsecondary Education Descriptive Analysis Reports, National Center for Education Statistics, Washington, DC.