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The Politics of Poverty: Higher Education and Low Income Adult Learners

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Keywords: Higher education, low-income adults, access to higher education

Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to examine and discuss the growing trends in higher education in the United States that narrow educational opportunities for poor and working-class adult learners.

In capitalistic systems like the United States, adult learners' access to formal learning experiences may be essential to their being able to succeed and participate in a democratic society. For many adult learners, formal learning experiences occur most frequently in some kind of higher educational context or institution, and in fact, adult learners over the age of 25 account for more than half of the student population in higher educational institutions in the United States (College Board, 1998). Research concerning adult learners in higher education addresses many facets concerning the concerns and needs of adult learners. Much of this research however, focuses on those adult learners who *do* participate in higher education, not on those who are so marginalized by political and social realities that they have little opportunity or access to higher education.

In my experience teaching in and administering programs for adult learners in higher education in the United States, I have increasingly seen changing policies and practices by higher educational institutions and state and federal governments that have increasingly limited learning opportunities for adult learners, particularly adults with limited financial resources. Mission statements and policies of universities have changed and severely limited access and support for adult learners. For instance, the university at which I currently teach was established 40 years ago in part to serve the urban community, namely minority, low-income, and/or working class adults. More recently, however, due to state and federal funding cuts and a myriad of political interests that have combined to narrow admittance standards and market the university to middle-class, suburban, and traditional aged college students, the possibilities for low-income adult learners to attend this particular institute have severely shrunk. These actions that limit access to higher education are particularly paradoxical since the 2004 US Census data points to my city of residence, Cleveland, Ohio, as one of the most impoverished city in the United States, with 31.3 percent of city residents living in poverty (US Census Bureau, 2004). Limited opportunities and access for adult learners to participate in higher education only contributes to these swelling poverty statistics, here and elsewhere. Many adult learners, no matter how hard they work, do not have the advantages, family support, money, good fortunes, right (read "light") skin color, ethnicity, social class, and/or whatever combination of these things is necessary to help them participate in higher education and earn a college degree. Despite the myths of success through hard work which perpetuate in books, television, and movies, "pulling one selves up by his or her bootstraps" is not possible for many low-income and poverty ridden adults, who face overwhelming burdens that mound against them.

Most university curriculum and programs were and still are, for the most part, geared toward traditional aged college students. "In spite of the increasing number of adult students enrolling in postsecondary education, the primary focus of most American colleges and universities

continues to be the 18-to-24 year-old 'traditional' student" (Cook & King, 2004, p.1). The presence of adult students challenges higher educational institutions to structure programs and services that meet their needs (Imel, 2001; Sissel, Hansman, & Kasworm, 2001).

Adult and higher educators must address the needs of low-income adult learners. One of the first areas for action is to attend to the policies and practices that will increase institutional, state, and federal politics to improve financial aids for low-income adult learners. Professors and/or administrators of higher education have inside knowledge and advocacy opportunities to become promoters for the needs of all adult learners. In addition, educators can initiate research that focuses on higher educational institutions, low income adult learners, and avenues to increase access for those adult learners who are currently unable to participate in higher education. Through qualitatively examining the stories of low-income adult learners, new understandings may be gained of the interlocking issues and systems that lock them in cycles of poverty and out of higher education. Adult and higher educators need to play a role in writing these stories, designing and carrying out research projects that can document the stories of low-income adult learners, the ways policies, institutions and programs reach adult learners as well as the failures that abound in providing access. Through such research, new understandings concerning low-income adults may be gained by those in both adult and higher education, and from these understandings, new programs and policies can be implemented to reach low income adults.

We are becoming a society that increasingly consists of those who "have" the cultural capital to participate and those who do not. Ehrenreich (2001), in her book describing the lives of low-income adult workers, says that when the rich and poor compete in an open market, the poor lose. The same is true for higher education - when the moneyed middle-class traditional aged college students' needs are competitively weighed against the needs of adult learners in higher education, the adults do not stand a chance of having their needs placed first. If the trends in higher education continue, the "first chance" traditional age students' interests will block "second chance" access for adult learners. Despite the number of studies concerning the needs of adult students in higher education, growing problems concerning access (or lack thereof) to higher education for adult learners, particularly low-income adults, and the related policy issues, have not been addressed. Through research and increased understanding of the needs of low-income adult learners, collaborative efforts between educators and institutions of higher education can facilitate programs that serve low-income adult learners and help them participate in higher education.

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