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Psychosocial Issues and Sources of Support Affecting Retention for Adult Learners: Generational Variations

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Keywords: adult, retention, psychosocial, generational, support

Abstract: Amid predictions of increasing numbers of jobs requiring employees with degrees, the retention of adult students returning to degree programs has become a critical concern. This study investigates generational differences in psychosocial factors that may influence adult students to discontinue taking classes, and the sources of support they find most helpful and important. A newly-created survey instrument was found to have acceptable validity and reliability and used to collect data from thousands of adult college students in April-May 2011.

Purpose
The purpose of the quantitative descriptive and correlational study was to investigate the extent to which certain psychosocial issues experienced by adult learners varied based on generational cohort membership. The study also measured any variance that may exist between past educational experience and psychosocial issues experienced, between generational cohort affiliation and preferred sources of personal support, and between psychosocial issues experienced and intent to continue taking classes. At the time this paper was prepared, a research instrument had been created and validated with subject matter experts, and a pilot study of the instrument conducted to establish reliability. This paper will review the results of the pilot study. The conference presentation will include the final results of the main study.

Theoretical Framework
Recent media attention has been focused on the declining educational attainment of Americans and the resulting consequences for U.S. advancement and productivity. The lack of degree-prepared employees presents a growing concern for national economic growth, since several labor reports have indicated a projected increase in the percentage of jobs requiring a post-secondary degree (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2009; Eduventures, 2008; Soares, 2009). Adults earning degrees may lessen the concern, since adult enrollment in higher education is projected to increase up to 20% by 2016 (Eduventures, 2008).

However, enrollment does not always result in degree attainment. In Milam’s (2008) study of non-traditional students, the 18 month retention rate for full-time enrollment was only 28.9%, and 47.9% for part-time enrollment. Degree-attainment was even less frequent: 28.1% of full-time non-traditional students and 5% of part-time non-traditional students had earned an associates or bachelor’s degree after six years of study.

Research on the factors influencing retention of adult learners in post-secondary degree programs has focused on academic preparation and competence, lifestyle deterrents (such as lack of time and money), institutional deterrents (such as inconvenient class times and office hours), and, to a lesser extent, psychosocial issues such as self-esteem and goal clarity. The influence of psychosocial issues on retention has been studied primarily through individual interviews with
small numbers of participants, so the extent to which these issues influence degree-attainment is largely unknown.

Another area of inquiry that has been noticeably neglected is the relationship between age at enrollment and retention. Most definitions of “non-traditional student” or “adult learner” place every learner over the age of 22 in one demographic category. Assuming all adult learners are similar is theoretically risky when considering psychosocial experiences, since life-span theorists such as Erikson (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007), Levinson (Kittrell, 1998), and Sheehy (1995) have identified sequential and developmentally unique periods of life throughout adulthood.

**Theories of Adult Student Retention**

While research related to retention of traditional-age college students has been ongoing for many years, retention factors affecting adult students has been the topic of research only since the last part of the 20th century. Tinto’s (1993) student integration model may be the best-known work, but Bean and Metzner (1985) asserted that Tinto’s model could not be used to understand the attrition of non-traditional students because they did not seek satisfaction of socialization needs through educational outlets, a main component of Tinto’s theory. Instead, the Bean and Metzner model (1985) depicted relationships among background and defining variables (demographics), academic variables, and environmental variables (personal finances, work hours) that elicited academic and psychological outcomes (such as stress or goal commitment), which led to adult students’ decisions to remain in school or drop out.

Bean and Metzner’s work followed groundbreaking research by Cross (1981), which included the identification of “barriers” to adults’ participation in continuing education. Barriers are categorized as situational (related to practical considerations such as loss of job or lack of transportation), institutional (inconvenient class schedule or office hours, unavailability of faculty members), and dispositional (low self-esteem, failure to adopt the role of “learner”). Although only a small percentage of participants reported dispositional factors, Fogerson (2001) reported Cross thought the percentage was artificially low, a product of erroneous sampling methodology and response bias. Participants may have reported situational factors (such as lack of time or child care) because they were more socially acceptable than dispositional factors like fear of failure or feelings of incompetence.

Attrition factors related to psychosocial needs were identified by other researchers, but the constructs were not described consistently across studies. In reviewing anecdotal experiences, MacKinnon-Slaney (1994) identified psychosocial barriers to retention in a category labeled personal issues that included self-awareness, clarity of goals, and mastery of life transitions. Using a case study design, Muller (2008) found that the primary barrier to retention of adult women in an online academic program was related to multiple responsibilities arising from their various life roles. Feelings of anxiety, frustration, and isolation comprised another barrier for these women. Other researchers investigated the importance of adults expanding their self-identities to include the role of learner (Gallacher, Crossan, Field, & Merrill, 2002; Kasworm, 2008). All of these studies used small samples and focused on phenomena with limited boundaries, or were tentative conclusions synthesized from the literature. None of the findings have been tested for rigor using a large-scale quantitative design.
Lifespan Theories and Generational Influences

While many theorists have studied multiple aspects of psychosocial development from birth through college graduation, a smaller number have conjectured that psychosocial development continues into the adult years. Erikson, who coined the term “psychosocial,” presented one of the first and most well known theories about development through the lifespan that consisted of eight stages. (Torres, Howard-Hamilton, & Cooper, 2003) Three of Erikson’s stages occur in adulthood: Intimacy vs. Isolation, Generativity vs. Self-Absorption, and Integrity vs. Despair (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). Erikson suggested that adults may regress to re-resolve conflicts associated with earlier stages in different ways or more completely (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2003). Adults returning to school and re-establishing a “student” role as part of their identity may experience this regression to previously resolved psychosocial issues.

Levinson also hypothesized a stage-like theory consisting of four “eras,” three of which occur in adulthood: Early Adulthood (ages 17–45), Middle Adulthood (ages 40–65), and Late Adulthood (ages 60–death). Developmental tasks range from establishing tentative identity as an adult to questioning all goals, values, and choices at mid-life, to reflecting on achievements and regrets (Kittrell, 1998). Sheehy’s (1995) description of women’s development in adulthood outlined some of the same passages as those reflected in Levinson’s theory.

Because they are directly related to age, generational cohort membership may also affect the kinds of issues experienced when re-entering an educational environment. Research on generational cohorts has described how adults from different generations hold consistent sets of values and priorities (Kupperschmidt, 2000); these values and priorities could influence how adults navigate the psychosocial challenges present throughout life. Howe and Strauss (1991) defined a generation as “a cohort-group whose length approximates the spans of a phase of life and whose boundaries are fixed by a peer personality” (p. 60). A generation consists of four different periods: Youth (age 0-21) acquire values, Rising Adults (age 22-43) serve institutions and test values, Midlifers (age 44-65) provide leadership and direction, and Elders (66-87) mentor and pass down values (Howe & Strauss, 1991).

Researchers commonly use Howe & Strauss’ definitions for the five current generations, which are based on their birth years: Veterans (or GIs), born 1901 to 1924; Silents, born 1925 to 1942; Baby Boomers, born 1943 to 1960; Generation X, born 1961 to 1981; and Millenials, whose birth years began in 1982. There are at least three generations currently present in classrooms. In the early 2000’s, Baby Boomers are in the Midlifer phase of life (with just a few in the Elder phase), Gen X members are Midlifers and Rising Adults, and Millenials are Rising Adults.

Each generation currently involved in degree-seeking programs is personified by certain sets of “values, attitudes, preferences, and behaviors” (Kupperschmidt, 2000, p. 66). Baby Boomers are intensely competitive and have a very strong work ethic (Delahoyde, 2009), while members of Gen X value independent problem-solving and sufficient time for leisure activities (Walker et al., 2009). Millenials have only been considered adult learners since 2005, and are characterized as self-reliant, questioning, linear thinkers who believe respect must be earned, not automatically granted (Walker et al., 2009). These generational profiles have been used as a framework for investigating the learning styles and classroom activity preferences common to each generation (Coates, 2007; Delahoyde, 2009; Walker et al., 2006).

Given the amount of research supporting adult development and generational cohort theories, it is remarkable that very few studies of adult student retention have considered that
Retention factors, particularly psychosocial factors, might be influenced by the adult’s generational cohort affiliation.

**Research Design**

In the Phase 1 pilot study, survey items based on research about psychosocial issues experienced by adult learners was presented to a panel of experts for review. Based on their narrative comments and the overall content validity ratio of each item (Lawshe, 1975), a final instrument was developed. The instrument gathers data about the existence and influence of psychosocial issues for adult students, the sources of support they find most helpful with the issues, and various demographic indicators.

A beta test of the instrument was conducted with a sample of 641 first year learners attending University of Phoenix local campuses or online platform. Factor analysis was completed to determine the construct reliability of the instrument (Cooper & Schindler, 2003). Results of the reliability study are presented below.

Data for the Phase 2 main study are being collected during April-May 2011 and will be presented at the AERC conference in June.

**Findings, Conclusions, Implications**

The results of an exploratory factor analysis indicated the existence of stable factors constituting psychosocial issues faced by adult students. Extraction was accomplished using principal component analysis. A varimax rotation with Kaiser normalization converged in nine iterations and yielded a five-factor solution. The factor names and item loadings are presented in Table 1. Factor 1, Intrusion in Routine, represented psychological issues occurring because school-related activities displaced previous activities such as time spent with family, friends, and at work, doing something more enjoyable, and following their normal routine. Factor 2 was named Academic Uncertainty, and included items related to lack of intellectual self-confidence and worries about the academic journey. The items loading on Factor 3 clearly indicated the factor should be named Lack of Support from Family/Friends. Similarly, Factor 4 included items related to Lack of Support from Work Colleagues.

Items loading on Factor 5 suggested a type of psychosocial issue that has not been clearly acknowledged in previous literature. Labeled Uncertain Value of Personal Knowledge, the items seemed to indicate that adults are uncomfortable with the typical classroom paradigm of the professor holding all the knowledge and the student possessing little or no knowledge of the subject matter. Adults return to school with knowledge gained through life experience and/or previous education and they may experience discomfort when their knowledge is not valued in the academic setting. The third item loading on this factor does not seem, at face value, to relate to this experience. Assuming that the survey item may have been unclear, it will be rewritten for the main study.

Using data from the reliability study, the survey has been shortened to encourage a higher response rate in the main study. At least one item representing each factor remained on the survey; items with low factor loading and/or low mean responses were deleted, combined with another item, or reworded.
Data Analysis Plans for Main Study

Table 2 details the planned data analysis for the main study by research question. The data will be collected in April and May, 2011, and included in the June presentation at the AERC conference.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Items Loading on Factor</th>
<th>Loading</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intrusion in Routine</td>
<td>Time away from spouse</td>
<td>.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Time away from children</td>
<td>.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Time away from children</td>
<td>.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Out of routine</td>
<td>.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Feeling resentment</td>
<td>.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Time away from friends</td>
<td>.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Time away from work</td>
<td>.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Anxiety about school expenses</td>
<td>.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Uncertainty</td>
<td>Too big a risk</td>
<td>.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Question reaching goal</td>
<td>.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Worry about intellectual ability</td>
<td>.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Unclear about my goals</td>
<td>.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Feeling embarrassed</td>
<td>.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Unable to find resources</td>
<td>.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Felt isolated</td>
<td>.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of Support from Family/Friends</td>
<td>No support from other family members</td>
<td>.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No support from friends</td>
<td>.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No support from children</td>
<td>.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No support from spouse</td>
<td>.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of Support from Work Colleagues</td>
<td>No support from co-workers</td>
<td>.81</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No support from supervisors</td>
<td>.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uncertain Value of Personal Knowledge</td>
<td>Resisting new information</td>
<td>.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Angry over feedback</td>
<td>.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wanting to meet need of others</td>
<td>.56</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Research Questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RQ 2</th>
<th>What relationship, if any, exists between past educational experience and psychosocial issues experienced by an adult learner as a young adult based on membership in a generational cohort?</th>
<th>Educational experience</th>
<th>Type and extent of previous education experience</th>
<th>Nominal Type of Data Analysis</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Research Questions Variables</td>
<td>Variables</td>
<td>Measurement</td>
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<td></td>
<td>RQ 1</td>
<td>How, if at all, do psychosocial issues and psychosocial issues experienced by adult learners vary based on membership in a learner?</td>
<td>Psychosocial issues</td>
<td>Extent of Experience</td>
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<td>Influence on Continuing</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>RQ 3</td>
<td>What relationship does generational cohort have with psychosocial issues experienced by adult learners?</td>
<td>Psychosocial issues</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Influence on Continuing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Discussion, Conclusions and Implications

The newly-created instrument measuring adult student psychosocial issues, helpful sources of support for the issues, and the influence of the issues on the decision to continue or discontinue the academic journey possesses acceptable validity and reliability. Several identified psychosocial factors are supported by previous research on adult learners; a new factor was identified related to the value of personal knowledge adult students bring to the classroom. Factor 5, Uncertain Value of Personal Knowledge, may relate to identity issues identified in previous research on adult student retention factors (Cross, 1981; Gallacher, Crossan, Field, & Merrill, 2002; Kasworm, 2008). If the enacted and expected “student” paradigm consists of a neophyte possessing no theoretical or practical knowledge, adult students may be very uncomfortable integrating that “student” role into their identity. Faculty members and institutional staff members may need to modify their paradigm of “student” to relate appropriately to adult students.

The main thrust of this study is investigating any correlation that exists among the primary variables of psychosocial issues, sources of support, generational cohort, and intent to continue the academic journey. Main study data, conclusions, and implications will be presented at the AERC conference in June, 2011, in Canada.

References


