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### Recommended Citation

Schaefer, Jane L. (2009). "Older Baby Boomers Seeking Collegiate Degrees: Developmental Influences on Educational and Vocational Aspirations," *Adult Education Research Conference*.

<https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2009/papers/58>

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# **Older Baby Boomers Seeking Collegiate Degrees: Developmental Influences on Educational and Vocational Aspirations**

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**Abstract:** This paper summarizes findings from a phenomenological study designed to explore the experiences of degree-seeking, adult learners – specifically, Older Baby Boomers (OBB) born between 1946 and 1958. Findings seek to understand how adult development—psychosocial, cognitive, and spiritual dimensions—influences older adult students’ future aspirations, both career and retirement, and their transformational learning experiences within the context of higher education.

Several national trends are converging that greatly impact adult education today. First, the increasing presence of adults in higher education is accentuated by the expansive Baby Boom generation. Older Baby Boomers, the leading edge of this large cohort, are not only nearing retirement, but are returning to higher education in record numbers (Creighton & Hudson, 2002). Second, the demographic phenomenon of increasing adult learners impacts workforce and economic development in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Between 2000 and 2015 the highest growth rate in the U.S. workforce will be among workers aged 55 to 64 (Montenegro, Fisher, & Remez, 2002, p. 5). Even though four out of five Baby Boomers desire to continue working beyond typical retirement age, many will require upgraded skills and credentials (Freedman, 2005). A third significant trend impacting adult education is longer life expectancy—age 77 today compared to age 47 in 1900 (Zeiss, 2006). Longer life expectancy and longer life after retirement have encouraged older adults to participate in various new learning and work experiences.

## **Study Purpose and Contribution**

To meet the demands created by these trends, we need a deeper understanding of how adult learners—particularly those who are at or near traditional retirement age—access institutions of higher education, experience successful learning in their higher education endeavors, and plan to utilize their college education in their remaining work-lives. This phenomenological study examines the experiences of degree-seeking OBB between the ages of 50 and 62. Specifically, this study explores: (a) who contemporary, degree-seeking OBB students are and how they describe their support needs as they transition back into college; (b) the learning experiences and expectations of OBB students as they move through college and how those impact their cognitive development and adult transformative learning experiences; and (c) the influence of spirituality as OBB students move out from their educational experience toward vocational aspirations.

This study addresses qualitative research gaps in the higher education literature pertaining to the learning and development of older adult degree-seeking students. The majority of studies concerning older adult learners have focused on those seeking non-credit and informal education. Furthermore, the recent surge of studies regarding spiritual development in college has been quantitative in nature and largely focused on traditional-aged students. This study provides a deeper understanding of how those learners who are at or near traditional retirement age move into institutions of higher education, move through their college learning experience, and plan to move out of higher education toward their future vocational aspirations.

## Theoretical Framework

Characteristics of adult learners are illuminated through multiple constructs of adult development, including cognitive, psychosocial, and spiritual dimensions. Although numerous theories informed the design of this study, the data were analyzed using Nancy Schlossberg's transition model (psychosocial development), the construct of spiritual quest construct (spiritual development), and Jack Mezirow's transformational learning theory (cognitive development).

Prior studies of adult psychosocial development indicate that older adults often transition from concern about competency and personal welfare to concern about others and what is meaningful as they age (Bridges, 1980). Schlossberg's transition model identifies factors that influence a person's ability to cope with a particular transition such as going to college (Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 2006). Those grappling with life transitions may also be questioning the meaning and relevance of their remaining life's work and their individual purpose. This form of existential engagement represents the spiritual dimension of adult development which can be understood as one's *spiritual quest* (Lindholm, Goldberg, & Calderone, 2006).

As human beings adult students have a felt need to understand and make sense of their experience—cognitively, psychosocially, and spiritually. To create higher learning environments most conducive to adults' success, adult educators and program administrators need to become astute as to how the various dimensions of adult development influence student learning. Adult educators must strive to increase the capacity of students to become critically aware of their own cognitions and to assess their relevance for learning, a task which is central to adult transformative learning (Mezirow, 2000)

## Research Design

A study which explores the intersection of older adult students' development and adult learning lends itself to qualitative research methodology. This phenomenological study explored the experiences of older adults returning to college and was framed within the epistemology of constructivism, using an interpretive theoretical perspective. A purposeful sampling strategy was used to select nine students enrolled in a bachelor's degree completion program at a Midwest university. Volunteer participants, between the ages of 50 and 62, were seeking undergraduate degrees, as opposed to those engaged in life-long learning for the purposes of personal enrichment or corporate training. Using a modification of Siedman's three interview approach (1998), primary data collection methods consisted of: (a) two 90-minute semi-structured individual interviews; (b) one 30-minute phone contact (which served as a third interview); and (c) one reflection questionnaire adapted from Nino's Spiritual Quest Assessment (1997) which provided insight into individuals' ideas about spirituality. Secondary data collection consisted of an archival data review of the degree requirements of the program in which students were enrolled. Research questions guiding this study were:

1. What is the experience of OBB pursuing higher education degrees? What past experiences and future aspirations bring them to higher education? Why are they seeking higher education degrees?
2. How do the multi-dimensions of adult development—cognitive, psychosocial, and spiritual— influence older adult students' transformative learning and meaning-making experiences in

higher education? Conversely, how does their college experience influence their personal growth and development?

3. How do OBB view and describe the role of higher education in supporting their continued development and future vocational aspirations?

Data were systematically analyzed by first listening to each interview and reading all transcripts to get a general sense of the data. This holistic review of data was followed by a more focused, three step examination process. First, the data were dissected into the smallest units of meaning to discover any significant statements of reality from the participants' perspectives. Then, data were pieced back together inductively in new ways to produce meaningful interpretations of participant statements. Finally, themes of meanings emerged from the data analyses and an exhaustive description of the phenomenon was created. Multiple strategies were utilized to verify conclusions including triangulation of data, presenting negative or discrepant information, retaining access to participants for continued member-checking, and utilizing both a peer reviewer and an external auditor to develop intersubjective consensus.

### **Findings and Conclusions**

Persistent patterns of findings emerged from the data, including, but not limited to, the following: older adult learner characteristics and reasons for enrollment; higher education support needs; adult transformative learning; self-identified cognitive, psychosocial, and spiritual development; vocational concerns of meaning, purpose, and service; and spiritual influences on future aspirations. These findings reveal the essence of the phenomenon of older adults pursuing higher education degrees, as perceived by participants to be a self-identified transformative process resulting in improved learner self-efficacy, and acquired within a supportive, adult-friendly higher education environment which enabled students to successfully transition not only toward degree completion and ensuing career enhancements, but toward meaningful vocational aspirations grounded in personal spiritual beliefs. Findings were inducted from the data regarding OBB students' experience of the higher education process, as summarized in Table 1.

#### *Moving In: Higher Education Support Needs of Older Baby Boomers*

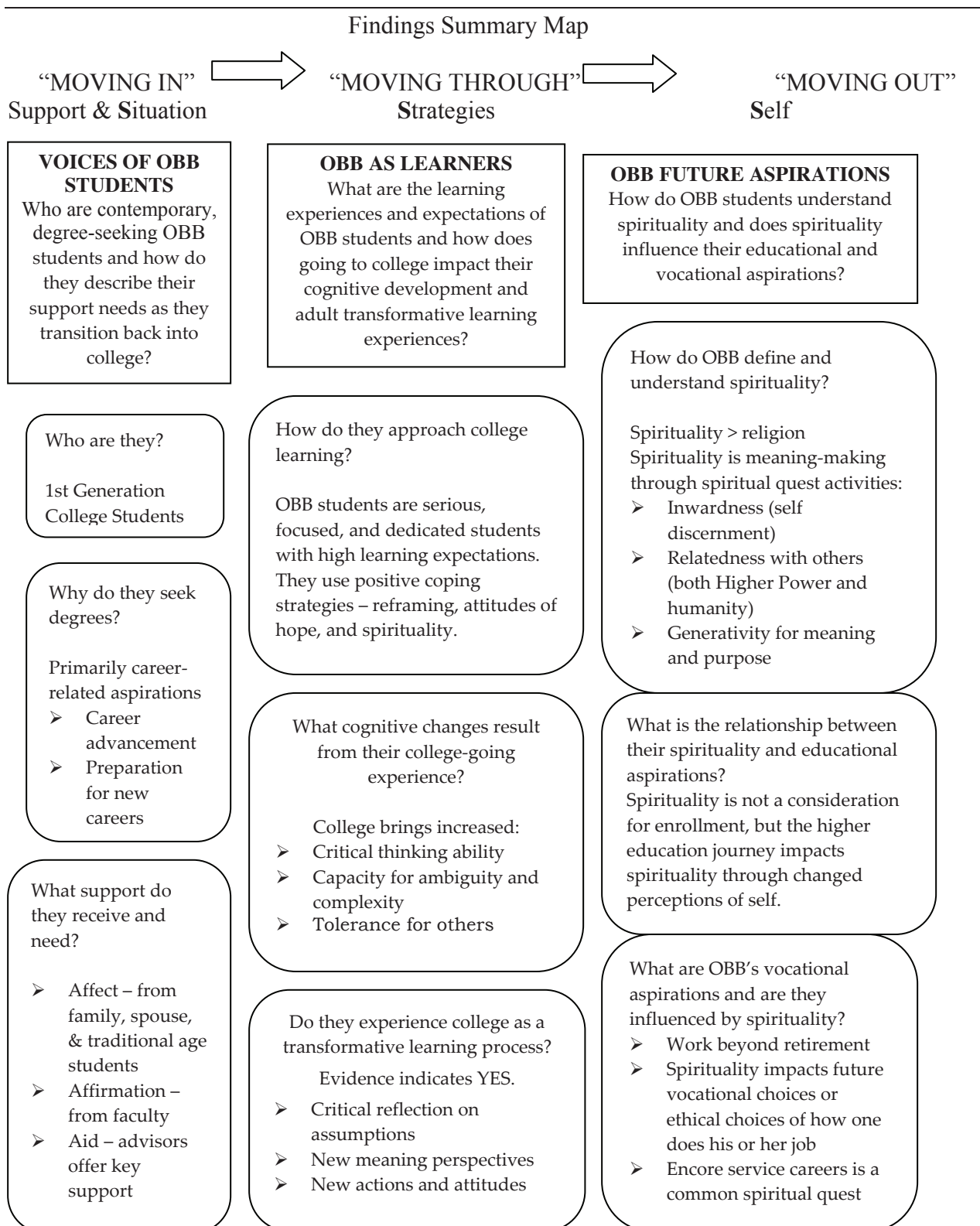
Who are contemporary OBB students and what support needs do they have when moving in to college as older adults? Most OBB college students are first generational college students and experience an information deficit about higher education processes. Degree-seeking older adult students are primarily motivated by career aspirations, not personal enrichment. Many are returning to college due to job loss, need of enhanced credentials for promotion, or to train for a new career altogether. OBB students experience complex support needs while transitioning back into their college endeavors, particularly since many have had experiences of academic failure as traditional aged college students. OBB students sought support through expressions of admiration (affect), agreement or acknowledgement from others or even oneself (affirmation), and assistance in such things as money, time, and entitlements (aid). Advisors, faculty, and family members played important support roles for OBB learners.

#### *Moving Through: Older Baby Boomers' Transformative Learning in College*

How does one describe OBB as learners? Findings reveal important characteristics of persons who will be entering adult programs in the next decade. OBB students are serious learners, and most have worked to overcome learning doubts, fears, and past regrets. They are dedicated to

Table 1

*Transition of Older Baby Boomer College Students*



academic success and practice self-regulation to achieve goals and increase their self-efficacy. OBB students have high learning expectations of both themselves and their instructors. Learning, for example, must be applied, and a social interaction is preferred. Most use positive coping strategies to approach learning, including reframing problematic situations, maintaining an attitude of hope, and using spirituality to transition through stressful situations. How does college learning impact older adults' cognitive development, and does it result in personal transformation? The college learning experience of study participants resulted in increased cognitive capacities which precipitated experiencing college itself as a transformative learning process. OBB students attained an increased ability for critical reflection and discourse, a capacity for ambiguity and complexity, and a tolerance of others. These cognitive changes resulted in varying degrees of transformative learning. Engaging in the transformative learning process enabled students to experience changed meaning perspectives and resulted in greater freedom to act on their own purposes, values, and meanings, rather than relying on those assimilated blindly from others. Such vital developmental changes in adults cannot be ignored.

#### *Moving Out: Future Aspirations and Spiritual Quests of Older Baby Boomers*

“Researchers have only just begun to investigate the connections between adult learning, spirituality and transformative learning within the higher education setting” (Groen & Jacob, 2006, p. 76 ). Many adult educators believe that the spiritual dimension of education is important to meaning-making in adult learning. But, how do OBB students define and understand spirituality? Does spirituality influence the educational and vocational aspirations of OBB students? Typical of the Baby Boom generation, OBB students define spirituality as different from religion and tend to place greater value on spirituality than religious practices. Unlike traditional aged students, OBB do not look for higher education to play a role in their spiritual development, but they do acknowledge the importance of spirituality in their own daily living. They also acknowledge a spiritual influence in their vocational aspirations, either on the type of work they choose to pursue or, at the very least, on the way they go about conducting themselves at work. Furthermore, those seeking to delay retirement to serve others through encore careers seem especially cognizant of spiritual influences in their quest for meaning and purpose.

#### **Implications for Adult Education Theory and Practice**

This study has important implications for student affairs personnel. Meeting the needs of older adult learners includes strategies, such as: (a) addressing issues of equitable and streamlined access for part-time students; (b) removing financial aid barriers for those who work full-time yet have limited disposable income to spend on educational pursuits; (c) providing increased flexible course scheduling and expanded on-line course availability; (d) standardizing assessments of prior learning and articulation processes to efficiently allow for work experience credits; and (e) providing student services for adult-specific support needs. In particular, higher education must respond to adult learners' tendencies toward service-related careers. Half of Americans age 50 to 70 want jobs that contribute to the greater good (Freedman, 2005). By helping older adult students prepare for such careers, colleges will capture a new population of students to serve, and will help millions of people find greater significance and purpose in life” (Zeiss, 2006, p. 40).

This study also has valuable pedagogical implications to consider. Faculty professional development opportunities are imperative to enable faculty members to know how to employ more transformative learning and teaching strategies, to become comfortable in acknowledging the spiritual dimension of adult learning, and to become adept at revising curriculum

requirements to account for adult learners' workplace experiences. To remain relevant and effective with adult learners, college faculty and staff must learn to habitually acknowledge and integrate the importance of **all** learning, including that beyond formal higher education such as life experiences, continuing professional education, and job experiences. The supportive higher education of the future environment entails honoring alternative modes of student meaning-making aside from cognitive, rational approaches, such as the affect expressed in spirituality.

This study provides employers with possible directions for policy changes necessary to accommodate the vocational aspirations of those who are redefining the course of retirement. Since OBB desire to do work that is intellectually stimulating, employers must be proactive in providing innovative opportunities for continued and meaningful employment, such as part-time, flexible schedules and tuition reimbursement for those who wish to complete bachelor degrees or seek advanced degrees. Just as academic programs serving career-minded OBB students must go beyond the confines of typical senior programs (designed primarily for enrichment), employers must provide talent management and retirement planning that encompasses more than mere financial planning. Life planning is key to retaining the knowledge capital so prevalent in OBBs.

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