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Onna T. Jordan Ms

North Carolina A & T State University, otjordan@aggies.ncat.edu

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Educational Gerontology: Bridging the Gap between Older Adult Learners and Historically Black Colleges and Universities

Onna Jordan

North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University

Abstract: Older adult learners account for a significant percentage of the educational market, higher education institutions should identify, and make educational program adjustments surrounding the needs, motives and outcomes of this evolving demographic (Brady & Fowler, 1988).

Keywords: educational gerontology, nontraditional adult learner, baby boomers

Educational gerontology is the study and practice of instructional endeavors for and about aged and aging individuals (Hiemstra, 1998). Due to the steady increase of older adult learners entering into higher education institutions, educational gerontology has persisted as an emerging field of study since its birth in the late 1950's (Hiemstra, 1998). Because of the demographical shift, educators within the field of educational gerontology have been provided with the opportunity to experience increasing numbers of diversity within the learning environment (Brown, et al., 2013). With diversity on the rise, there is an immediate need for increased researchers whose work is specialize within the field of educational gerontology, highlighting individuals from diverse racial, ethnic, and cultural populations, particularly those who identify as Black and/or African American (Brown, et al., 2013). While scholars have explored older adults in higher education for years, scarce literature can be found wherein the focus is on older adult learners at Historically Black Colleges or Universities (HBCU).

Research Question

The purpose of this study will be to uncover and understand the experiences of the African American nontraditional adult learner, age sixty-five and older who are enrolled in a higher education institution. Specifically, for the purpose of this study the nontraditional adult learner within this context is defined as an African American continuing education student age sixty-five and older. This study will be guided by the following research question: How has your personal experiences of returning to or enrolling in an institution of higher education shaped your perceptions of educational attainment?

Significance of the Study

Currently, individuals age sixty-five and older known as the “baby boomers” generation, are the largest growing American population, this key demographic reached retirement in the year 2011 (DiSilvestro, 2013). Individuals residing within this older demographic will be the core representatives of individuals age sixty-five and older for the oncoming forty years, with an estimated growth value of seventy-two million by the year 2030 (DiSilvestro, 2013). Rising United States populations have led to two overall assumptions, the first assumption notes the obvious increase in older adults residing in America (DiSilvestro, 2013). The second assumption provides legitimacy, stating that the increase in population size for this demographic of people is the result of extended life expectancies (DiSilvestro, 2013).

Along with increased longevity, older adult learners are in good functional health with an increase in the level of educational attainment in successive generational units of older adults

(Chen, et al., 2008). Currently, older adult learners are regarded as capable and motivated learners with few cognitive or physical limitations (Chen, et al., 2008). Indicators of continued participation in learning activities are evident through the educational level of the aging adult learner (Chen, et al., 2008). Results prove that the higher the educational level of older adult learners, the greater their likelihood is of them engaging in additional educational activities (Chen, et al., 2008). Due to the demographical shift in educational attainment, higher education institutions are providing advocacy for the rapidly growing population of older adult learners (DiSilvestro, 2013). By doing so, institutions are making use of the “golden opportunity” to fill job shortages, increase the tax base, decrease the use of the health care system, and to contribute to the advocacy for higher education (DiSilvestro, 2013). This study seeks to understand the motivations, perceptions of enculturation, and the need for professional development within the field of gerontology, to better assist older adult learners who are returning to, or enrolling in higher education institutions early on, and assist in connecting them with campus services and support.

Review of the Literature

Brady and Fowler (1988) identified three areas of educational motivation for aging adult learners; cognitive interest, goal orientation, and prior learning. Cognitive interest, or the desire to know or learn something was found to be the main motivator, and the most frequent reason given for educational participation, with personal fulfillment, followed by job related reasons (Brady & Fowler, 1988). These findings conclude that there is a need for educators to develop programs that meet the needs of older adult learners by maintaining and enhancing psychological growth of aging adult learners (Brady & Fowler, 1988). Goal orientation, a second motivation corresponds with establishing goals, interests, identifying sources of help, and attitudes required to reach goals (Brady & Fowler, 1988). Participants showed higher awareness of learning needs, goals, and educational resources than nonparticipants, and had a greater propensity towards self-directed learning (Brady & Fowler, 1988). Lastly, prior learning outcomes showed that despite aging adult learner’s age related declines, results show that the more education individuals have the more education they want, and that motivational factors prove to be better predictors of outcomes than demographic and educational factors (Brady & Fowler, 1988).

Eaton and Salari (2005) opens with an in-depth discussion on the future of education in retirement communities. Education is described as “an investment in the well-being of older adults, as learning enhances quality of life, decreases dependency, increases self-confidence, and motivation” (Eaton & Salari, 2005). Aging and aged adult learner’s desire and have the capacity to learn, but if the learning situation in senior communities does not fit their needs then they will simply stop attending and said programs will cease to exist (Eaton & Salari, 2005). The authors attribute the success of learning in retirement communities to andragogic teaching styles, the art and science of teaching adults (Eaton & Salari, 2005). Andragogic teaching not only respects, but acknowledges the learner’s experiences, autonomy, and choices (Eaton & Salari, 2005).

Conclusion

When deciding to return to or enroll in an institution of higher education older adult learners face both expected and unforeseen barriers (Hardin, 2008). These barriers include managing workloads, enrollment statuses, finances, dual responsibilities, deficiencies, and delays (Hardin, 2008). Because the practice of adult education has changed, educators must strive to develop intricate and complex instructional strategies, while developing innovative programming (Eisen, 2005). Anderson (1999) discusses six challenges faced by institutions of higher education within the 21st century, as well as methods in which they might respond. These

challenges include educating the public, recruiting and training students, educating non-professionals and paraprofessionals, forging partnerships with industry, providing education for older adults, and educating gerontology faculty requiring institutional change (Anderson, 1999). To retain the older and aging demographic, institutions must address activities that attract elders, and then maintain their interest by offering programs that foster continued development, assistance through transitions, and productivity (Eisen, 2005).

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