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THE UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES OF GOOD INTENTIONS

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Abstract

Adult education programs encourage adults to attend college after they receive their GED, yet the programs do not prepare them for the transition or on how to be successful. Colleges and adult education programs do not give enough attention to the challenges and barriers the adult learner faces. Programs assume that adult learners know how to balance the rigour of college and their other responsibilities. After all they are adults. Yet, studies have shown that 77% of GED graduates who attend community and technical colleges withdrew at the end of the first semester.

Keywords: Adult learner, general equivalency diploma, post-secondary, transition.

At one time, a high school diploma was all a student needed to find decent employment; however, in the 21st Century getting a college degree places an individual closer to gaining middle-class status (Haskin, Holzer, & Leman, 2009). In schools, there is a great emphasis on postsecondary education. From the time when students enter elementary school, they are bombarded with college materials. Teachers keep telling them how important going to college is. When they reach middle school, they begin to see college pennants in the halls, and when they reach high school, conversation involves the following question, "What college are you going to after you graduate?" Yet in the United States, there are about 39 million adults that have not graduated from high school, and not having their diploma has prohibited them from earning college degrees and credentials necessary for higher paying positions.

General Educational Development (GED) programs are a way for students ages 16 – 18 years of age and older to earn an alternative to the high school diploma. Every year 1.2 million students enroll in an adult education program in the US. Students come from a diverse background: those who need to learn English and students who have dropped out of high school, and many have had a negative experience in the traditional school system.

General Education Development Diploma

General Educational (2020) stated that, "The General Educational Development (GED) exam is a group of four tests that assess an individual's knowledge of academic subjects typically taught in high school. Test takers who pass all four sections earn a certificate of completion from the state where the test was held. The GED tests cover four content areas: language arts, social studies, science, and math. Each section has a time limit. The GED tests are now taken on a computer, and question formats include multiple choice, fill-in the blank, hot spot, and drag-and drop. The GED test is aligned to the Common Core College and Career Standards that supposed to prepare adult learners for success in college, technical training, or work.

The Problem

Traditional college students graduate from high school, just turning 18, and looking forward to staying on campus for four years. That used to be the norm. Adult learners, also considered as non-traditional students, make up about 40 percent of college students in the United States. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reports that there are several characteristics that determine who is considered non-traditional: (1) did not go to college right after high school, (2) attending college part-time instead of full-time, (3) working either full or part-time (3) having children (4) being a single parent, and (5) having a GED rather than a high school diploma. Studies have found that about 75% of undergraduate students is in at least one of the categories.

Adult learners face different challenges from the traditional student. Terralever (2020) shared three major barriers that keep non-traditional students from finishing their degrees. He explains that low-income students have a hard time balancing school and work. They tend to attend class part-time. And, while they are attending adult education classes, once they get a job they can often stop coming to class. The second barrier Terralever identifies is being a first-generation student. Applying for college is not easy and first-generation students need guidance and support. Being a part of an adult education program, they may not get the guidance needed. The third is not being prepared academically. College courses are fast paced and self-guided, and no one is going to spoon feed the student information. Adult learners may have no clue that to be successful in college one must have strong time management skills, be able to set priorities, and be able to meet deadlines.

Recommendations

Adult education programs must take an active role in helping adult learners transition to college, and provide them with the tools to stay and complete their degrees. Programs need to educate and work with the adult learners on the barriers they are facing and together develop strategies to deal with them. Harrington (2000) shared that colleges should also take an active role with the help of transitioning adult learners by including the following items in a transition program: academic advising, additional tutoring, personal and career counselling, how to find and apply for financial assistance, scholarships, and instructional materials (p.4).

Conclusion

40% of college students are considered nontraditional yet 2/3 students leave college without completing their degree. Karmelita(2020) wrote, "By acknowledging the uniqueness of each adult learner's academic journey and providing earlier and more comprehensive advising, it is possible to enhance the adult learner's transition to college."

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