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Are Adult Students Less Engaged in College?

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Introduction

Currently over 43% of undergraduates are over age 24 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2003). The fastest growing institutions in the nation are those which include programs specifically designed for adult students. Yet there is a dearth of research about how to promote learning outcomes for these adults. When adults are busy juggling families and jobs, how can they be very engaged in college? This presentation explores the differences in student engagement between adult and traditional-aged students. This study utilizes findings from the National Survey of Student Engagement at a private college with a large adult student population. Findings suggest that adults are very engaged in their educational experiences, but the nature of their engagement differs from traditional-aged students. This presentation elaborates on the nature of these differences and applies these findings to the organization of quality adult programs.

There is a wealth of higher education literature suggesting that students who are socially, emotionally and intellectually engaged in their education have greater learning outcomes in college. As more and more adults come back to college there needs to be a close examination of this engagement theory as it applies to adults. Conventional wisdom says that adults who have family and career commitments cannot be as engaged in their education as traditional-aged students. Some would argue that this necessarily leads to lower graduation rates among adult students. However, at Indiana Wesleyan University, the graduation rates of adult students are not significantly lower than traditional-aged students. An examination of NSSE data is useful in interpreting the challenges and successes of adult programming.

Background

Indiana Wesleyan University (IWU) is an ideal laboratory in which to study adult students. In addition to 2600 traditional-aged students located at its residential campus in Marion, IWU has over 7500 adult students at several education centers throughout Indiana, Ohio and Kentucky. There is a separate College of Adult and Professional Studies which has a first-year retention rate of 94.5% and a graduation rate of 80%. This is dramatically higher than the national graduation rate of 38% for adult students (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2003).

The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) collects data from colleges and universities around the country. It is directed by George Kuh at the Center for Postsecondary Research at Indiana University-Bloomington. The survey includes questions about how much time students spend in academic and non-academic activities, what kinds of activities engage them in and out of class, their perceptions of the institution, and how their education has impacted their lives. Over 200,000 students from 473 colleges and universities participated in this survey in Spring 2004.

Indiana Wesleyan University also participated in NSSE in Spring 2004. NSSE selected a random sample of 348 first year and 348 seniors who received an invitation to participate in the survey in February 2004. The response rate was 56% which is much higher than the total NSSE response rate of 38%. Of these respondents 70% were students in the College of Adult and Professional Studies. At the request of the researcher, NSSE was able to include an additional variable in their data set, which identified the college of the respondent. In this way, the researcher was able to compare the responses of adults with traditional-aged students. The mean scores were analyzed using t-tests, noting several significant differences ($p < .05$) between adults and traditional-aged students.

Findings

Data indicate that adults are not necessarily less engaged in college. In fact, in many ways they are more engaged than traditional-aged students. Adults tend to be more involved in their academic work by spending more time on studies and producing more homework. Here are some of the specific findings:

- **Both adults and traditional students are satisfied with their college education.** Both evaluate their entire educational experience very highly and would choose this college again.
- **Adults are very engaged in their education, but the nature of that engagement is slightly different than traditional students.** Adults have significantly more conversations with fellow students, family, friends and co-workers about their academic work. They spend more time preparing for classes and produce more academic work (papers, presentations) than traditional students. They are less likely to come to class without completing readings or assignments. In class, they are more likely to ask questions or contribute to discussions. Traditional students are more engaged in co-curricular activities including community-based projects, internships, worship, special speakers, cultural performances and athletic events.
- **Adult students may know fewer of their fellow students, but have very close relationships with those students.** They rate the quality of their relationships with fellow students significantly higher than traditional students. They work with classmates outside of class to prepare class assignments. They perceive that the institution encourages contact among students from different economic, social, and racial/ethnic backgrounds. They perceive that the college has contributed to their skill in working effectively with others.
- **Traditional students are more involved in unpaid service to the community.** They are more likely to be involved in an internship or service project. They are more likely to perceive that the college contributes to the welfare of the community and that it has made them more likely to contribute their time to volunteer service work.
- **Traditional students have a stronger perception that the college has contributed to their personal and spiritual growth.** They are more likely to say that the college contributed to a deepened sense of spirituality and provides the support they need to thrive socially. Compared to when they first enrolled, they are more likely to talk about issues of faith with others. Traditional students also rate academic advising more highly than adult students.
- **Many differences in the academic impact are obviously related to differences in the curriculum between the College of Adult and Professional Studies and the College of Arts and Sciences.** Adult students more likely perceive the coursework emphasized analysis, synthesis, and making judgments. Traditional students more likely perceive their coursework emphasized memorizing. Adult students are more likely to perceive growth in writing, speaking, group, quantitative and computer skills.
- **Adults are similar to students at other institutions in their exposure and commitment to diverse people and ideas.** They are more likely to have had serious conversations with students who are very different in race/ethnicity or religious/ political/ personal values. They have included diverse perspectives in class discussions or writing assignments. They perceive that the college encourages contact among students from different economic, social and racial or ethnic backgrounds and that the institution has contributed to their growth in understanding people from diverse backgrounds. Compared to when they first enrolled, adults more likely believe that the real value of a college education lies in being introduced to different ideas and values. After their experience at college, they are more likely to consider all sides of an issue before making up their minds.

Conclusions

This analysis of NSSE data comparing adults with traditional-aged students is full of good news for adult-focused institutions. Adults can be very engaged in academic activities when provided with an adult-friendly format for their education. Adults enjoy their academic work and

are highly motivated to study hard and produce high quality work. As a result, they appreciate their academic experience and perceive that they have acquired both general education along with work-related skills. It appears that adults particularly thrive when they interact in classrooms with other adults who share similar life experiences. Adults enjoy working together and motivate one another toward excellence. They also have high expectations when it comes to curriculum and faculty, so adult-focused institutions need to ensure excellence in these areas.

Are adult students at an educational disadvantage because the nature of their engagement in college is different than for traditional-aged students? NSSE assumes that participation in co-curricular activities is important for the maximum benefit of a college education. But adult students have little time and interest for such college-sponsored activities. They are not likely to participate in co-curricular activities such as cultural or sporting events. They are not likely to participate in college sponsored service projects or study abroad. But they are likely to be very involved in family, community or work-related activities which may be cultural, athletic, or service in nature. Instead of attending the college football game, they may be attending their children's soccer game. Instead of participating in a college-sponsored service project, they may be volunteering in their children's school or actively serving in their church. The educational benefits of their participation in these community activities may be similar to that of the traditional-aged students participating in college-sponsored activities.

This study dispelled some of the common myths about the marginal status of adult students. Adults are actually very involved in their academic work, though they may not be very involved in the co-curricular activities of the residential campus. When provided with a supportive academic environment which recognizes the special needs of adults, they will thrive as students. Adults are highly motivated and will study harder and produce more academic work than their traditional-aged counterparts. They will greatly appreciate quality faculty who respect their experiences and maturity. They demand curriculum which is challenging, yet very relevant to their daily lives. Given such opportunities they will become very engaged in their college careers and consequently enjoy many benefits from their education.

References

National Center for Educational Statistics. 2003. *Work first, study second: Adult undergraduates who combine employment and postsecondary enrollment*. U.S. Department of Education, NCES 2003-167.