

Counting On a Bright Future

OCAP Annual Conference

Working With Adult Learners

October 11, 2012

THE UNIVERSITY OF
OKLAHOMA

James P. Pappas, Ph.D.
Vice President University Outreach
University of Oklahoma



University OUTREACH

College of Continuing Education

College of Liberal Studies



“Relatively few [traditional] colleges and universities are fully responsive to diverse adult learners.” Even in the institutions that have attempted to serve adults, “there have been few thoughtful and systematic applications of current theoretical knowledge and demographic information about adults.”



Weathersby and Tarule, 1990, p. 42





Adults have appeared on campuses in ever-growing numbers during the last decade as a result of sociocultural trends. Their presence (or at least the recognition of their existence) has left faculty and administrators acting like a group of educational “Mad Hatters,” frantically trying to find the economic tea party that their increasing enrollments promise.



At the same time we act as if they don’t exist or they are categorized differently – some call this “adult apartheid.”

Pappas and Loring, “Returning Learners,” 1985





For a variety of reasons, ranging from enrollment management to a concern for their community missions, colleges and universities now seem willing to educate the adult; but they are at the same time unsure of how to respond to the adult student's needs. They are often naïve about how to treat older adults who do not accept the apprentice role, who insist on sharing experiences, who ask for classes on weekends, who complain about the lack of child care, and who threaten to leave before the general education sequence is finished.

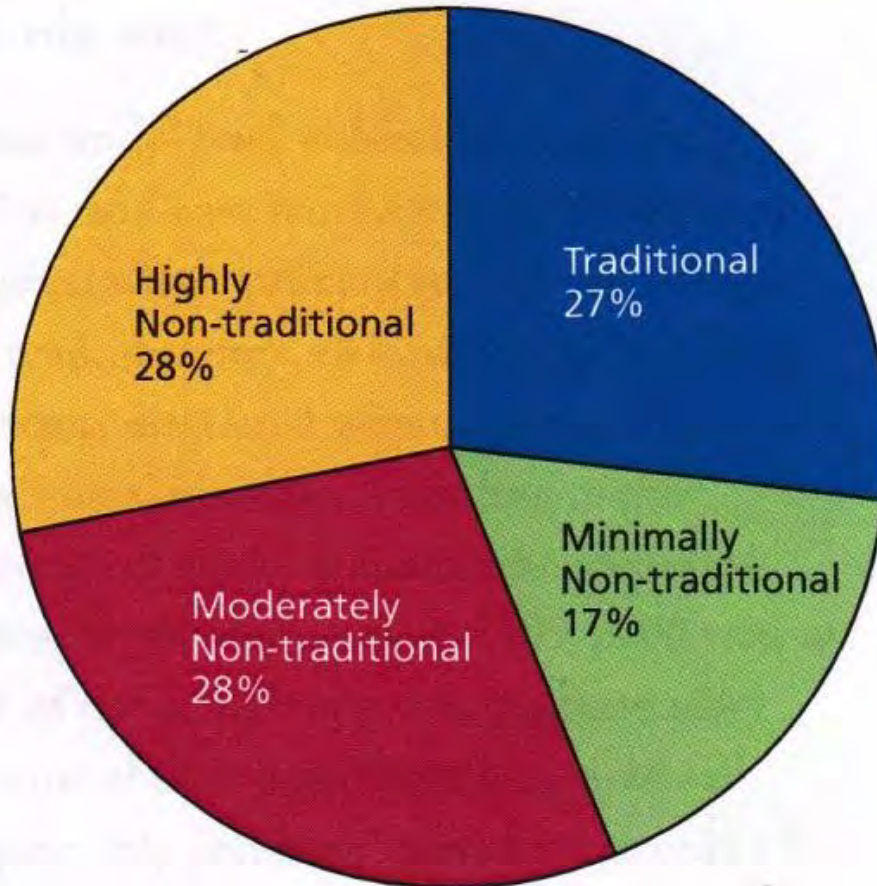


Pappas and Loring, "Returning Learners," 1985





Distribution of Students by Traditional/Non-traditional Status, 1999-2002



Choy, *Adult Learners in Higher Education*, 2002



We must not use the term “adult” in its static sense, which is age-bounded or stage-linked. The static concept might limit the definition of an adult to anyone over twenty-one and would not represent the broad needs of our hypothetical student. Rather, a definition of



adult which includes social roles or developmental processes would place an eighteen-year-old single parent with two children, working full-time, in the adult category.



As a corollary, we must recognize that for the adult, the student role is almost always secondary. Even when extensively engaged in education, adults see themselves first in occupational and/or family roles. They are first workers (or potential workers) or parents or husbands/wives and after that students. They are



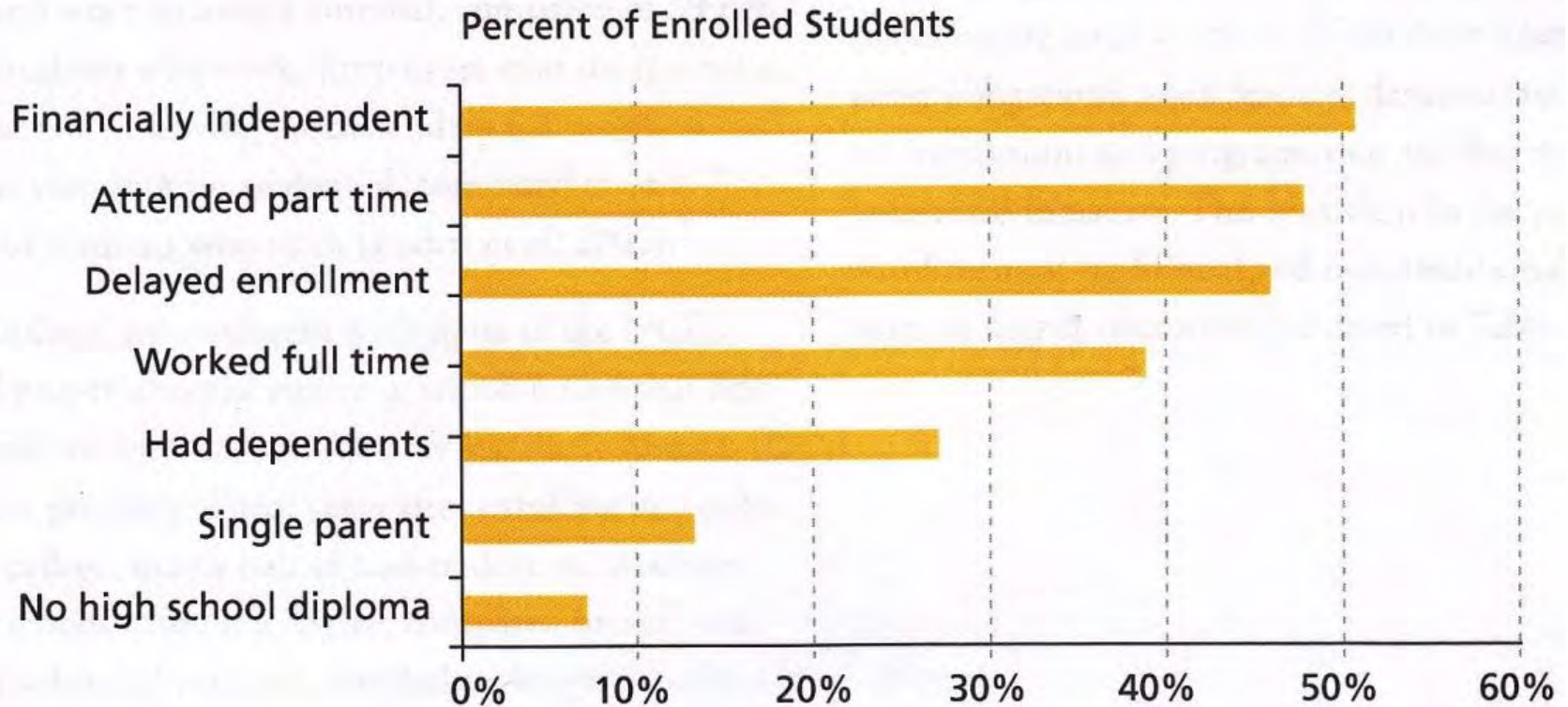
more likely to describe themselves as managers, teachers, government workers and so on, than as students.

Pappas and Loring, “Returning Learners,” 1985





Percent of Undergraduates with Non-traditional Characteristics, 1999-2002



Choy, Adult Learners in Higher Education, 2002



Life Happens to Adults...



- ✓ Often three generation “sandwich” person (parent, child, grandchild)
- ✓ Finances are critical (probability of “stopping out”)
- ✓ Available time is a critical variable
- ✓ Not familiar with campus rhythms, times (e.g., 6 week committee meeting, 8-5 office hours, closed for lunch, assigned speaker at 3)
- ✓ Getting books, materials (e.g., career cards)
- ✓ Online contacts, registrations create issues (e.g., oZONE)
- ✓ Will look for convenience, responsiveness (e.g., for profit recruiting, credit for experience)
- ✓ Often naïve about higher education (e.g., first generation)



Many adults attend college as a function of some specific trigger (Aslanian and Brickell, 1980), marker event (Levinson and others, 1978), milestone (Loevinger, 1976), transition (Gould, 1978; and Levinson, 1978) or task demand (Pappas, 1983), depending on the writers' semantics, related to their student roles.

Pappas and Loring, "Returning Learners," 1985





Even the adult who is involved in cultural enrichment or liberal arts classes is motivated by wanting to be happier or better in one of their other roles. Adult students often experience disequilibrium because of these marker events. Having a problem to be solved, they seek educational experiences that are problem centered rather than discipline or subject centered. They are also interested in the immediacy of the application of their learning; they do not perceive themselves as repositories of information that is to be stored for later application but as persons seeking current answers.

Pappas and Loring, "Returning Learners," 1985





Characteristics of Adult Learners...



- ✓ **Self-directed learners**
- ✓ **Motivated individuals**
- ✓ **Knowledgeable and experienced**
- ✓ **Anxious and easily frustrated**
- ✓ **Demanding consumers (“will walk”)**
- ✓ **Goal and relevance oriented**
- ✓ **Lacking in time**
- ✓ **Wanting to contribute**
- ✓ **Adults do not like to be tested**
(self image issues)
- ✓ **Achievement and grade oriented**

“Busy Teacher,” Knowles, 2012





Many of our adult students were not successful in school. Many were often behind their peers academically, which is one of the most cited reasons for dropping out of school. So students come to us with low confidence in their ability to learn. At the same time, they have *some* belief that they can learn, otherwise, why would they come? Instructors need to communicate to students that they believe they can learn regardless of their previous school experiences. Holding high expectations of students should also encourage instructors to be creative in explaining things in multiple ways, teaching learning strategies, and using examples that are familiar and relevant to students.

Sweeney & Cromley, RMC, 2002





Special issues to consider in teaching [serving] “adults”...

- ✓ Recognize the early anxiety
- ✓ Be aware that study skills may be “rusty”
- ✓ Be very explicit with class instructions
- ✓ Consider and acknowledge possible technology gap
- ✓ Value efficiency in course requirements
- ✓ Recognize they want to demonstrate knowledge
- ✓ Continue to reinforce achievement, “goals”
- ✓ Find ways to encourage engagement
- ✓ Make assignments relevant to “life, e.g., op ed piece, child journal, business plan
- ✓ Use real life examples, analogies, problems





Variables impacting adult student persistence...

- ✓ **Communication and information**
- ✓ **Socioeconomic variables**
- ✓ **Psychological variables**
- ✓ **Program and degree requirements**
- ✓ **Faculty and advisor behavior and interaction**
- ✓ **Situational variables, e.g., illness, job change**
- ✓ **Financial aid requirements**
- ✓ **Previous educational experience**
- ✓ **Length of time to completion of program**





Andragogy instead of Pedagogy...

...androgogical practice treats the learning-teaching transaction as the mutual responsibility of learners and teacher. In fact, the teacher's role is redefined as that of a procedural technician, resource person, and coinquirer; more a catalyst than an instructor, more a guide than a wizard.

Because adults are themselves richer resources for learning... greater emphasis can be placed on techniques that tap the experience of the adult learners, such as group discussion, the case method, the critical-incident process, simulation exercises, role playing, skill-practice exercises, field projects, action projects, laboratory methods, consultative supervision, demonstration, etc.

Knowles, 1999





Knowles' Andragogy Assumptions

- ❑ **The need to know** – Adult learners need to know why they need to learn something before undertaking to learn it.
- ❑ **Learner self-concept** – Adults are responsible for their own decisions and need to be treated as capable of self-direction
- ❑ **Role of learners' experience** – Adult learners have a variety of experiences of life which represent the richest resource for learning. These experiences are however imbued with bias and presupposition.
- ❑ **Readiness to learn** – Adults are ready to learn those things they need to know in order to cope effectively with life situations.
- ❑ **Orientation to learning** – Adults are motivated to learn to the extent that they perceive that it will help them perform tasks they confront in their life situations.

Based on Knowles 1990





The five assumptions underlying andragogy...

- 1. Has an independent self-concept and who can direct his or her own learning**
- 2. Has accumulated a reservoir of life experiences that is a rich resource for learning**
- 3. Has learning needs closely related to changing social roles**
- 4. Is problem-centered and interested in immediate application of knowledge**
- 5. Is motivated to learn by internal rather than external factors**

Merriam, 2001



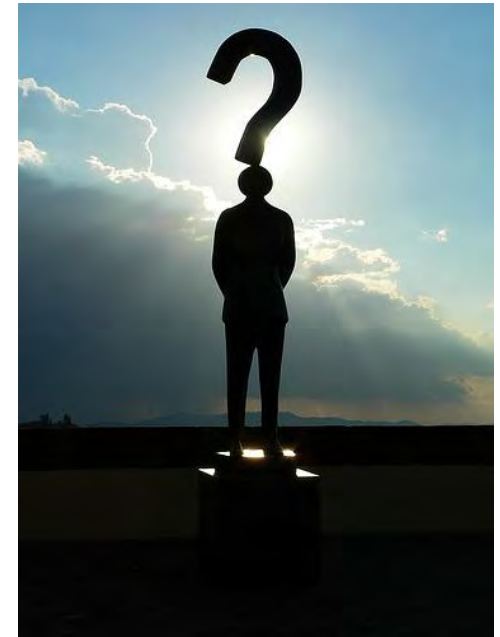
The human mind learns and remembers by connecting new information to old. If a person does not have existing knowledge to connect new information to, then learning is limited. Adults often have much knowledge about their jobs, how to deal with domestic and daily issues and other knowledge that traditional students are not likely to have. However, it can be surprising how little knowledge some adult learners have about academic or school-related topics. We should check each lesson to identify the foundational information that is needed to understand it, and then be sure to teach that information instead of assuming that students know it already.

Sweeney & Cromley, RMC, 2002



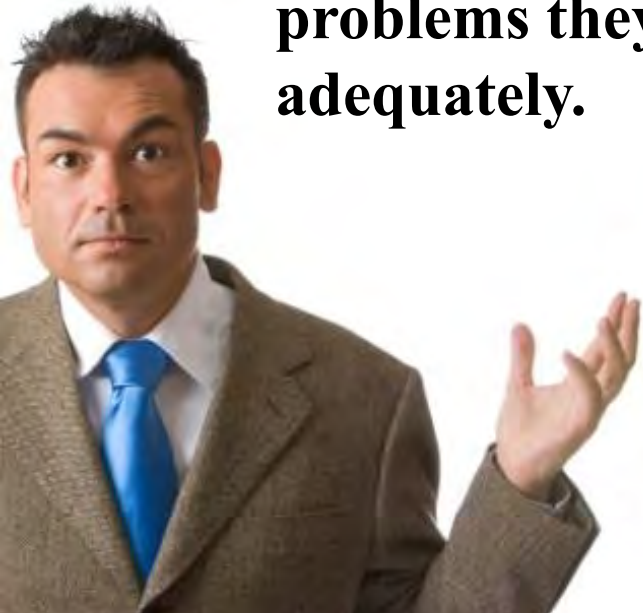


Adults enhance their ability to learn and understand information when they can “monitor their own thinking.” We can teach students to monitor their own level of understanding One of the most effective ways is to ask them “Why” questions: Why do you say that? Why did you give that answer? What information is your answer based on? (It is important to ask “why” even if the answer is correct.) And we can send a strong message that the ultimate purpose of education classes is *understanding* what we learn, not just getting the answer right.





Whereas the opening session of a typical college course might be titled “What This Course Is All About,” in an adult course it would be more appropriately be titled “What Are You Hoping to Get Out of This Course?” Early in the session there would be a problem census or a diagnostic exercise through which the participants would identify the specific problems they want to be able to deal with more adequately.



Knowles, 1999





Example of Intro To Career Development Class...

- **Background, desires, “personal lab”**
- **“Lecturettes” (40-50 minutes) [Socioeconomic]**
- **Career Lifeline exercise**
- **Career Wheel of Life exercise**
- **Lecturette [Life events and careers]**
- **Knowdell Values card sort**
- **Lecturette on Career Values**
- **Career Anchors assessment**
- **Lecturette on Career Anchors (Schein)**



"The current economic situation is making me look at more non-traditional forms of education (e.g., online courses) than I would have in the past."

Enrolling Online

"I am leaning more toward online courses or classes that can be finished quickly. The less work I miss the better with finances these days, and being able to do the courses online in the evenings would make that easier."



"Given the current economic conditions I am thinking more about getting my master's degree on a part-time basis so I do not have to leave my full-time job."

Attending Part-Time

"I am more afraid I will lose my current engineering job so I am more likely to return to school to retrain in another field. My concern is supporting myself and my family (I am a single parent) while I would be in school. This makes me more likely to look for part-time education."

"I want to pursue a college degree more quickly, because I know the cost of attending college will go up, as will the number of people who attend college. The sooner I complete a program, the faster I can get a job before someone else does. I consider credibility and cost, but the most important thing is still the quality of programs offered in the areas I am interested in."

Speeding Up Time-to-Completion

"[The economy] makes me want to choose a more marketable degree and faster completion than I would have previously."



Issues with Financial Aid...



- **Leary of assuming debt**
- **Very concerned with specifics and information, e.g., interest rates, repayment options, consequences**
- **Demanding of financial services and resources**
- **May be facing financial problems**
- **Will use information of deferment options**
- **Often adding to existing previous debt**
- **High numbers returning for masters**
- **Looking for dual degrees, e.g., Law and CLS**
- **Grumpy about services and responsiveness**



Why Teaching Adults is Fun Work (Great Stories)...



Gene Ellis: Army wife, Ohio U “stop out,” did degree completion at OU, finished three screenplays, her thesis was filmed (“Angela’s Decision”) and has one commissioned by Travolta Family Films



Major Samantha Weeks: Graduate of Advanced Programs HR program while in Korea, previous Air Force Academy grad, did 15 hours while flying, first female lead pilot for the Thunderbirds.



Jana Bingman, M.D.: Came back after children in school, earned a CLS degree, went on to medical school, did residency at UT, fellowship in psychiatry at UU, professor at OU-Tulsa



Mark Tozzio, M.S.: Full-time healthcare consultant, came back for degree, president of Hospital Development Consulting, Fellow, American College of Healthcare Executives



Jennifer Berry Gooden: Started at OU as education major with Miss Tulsa scholarship, became Miss Oklahoma and stopped out to go to OK schools, became Miss America and did a year of service, married, became ill, returned for an OU degree

