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### From stopout to scholar : pathways to graduation through adult degree completion programs.

Matt Bergman

University of Louisville, [matt.bergman@louisville.edu](mailto:matt.bergman@louisville.edu)

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# Table of Contents

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### Research Articles

- 1 **From Stopout to Scholar: Pathways to Graduation through Adult Degree Completion Programs**  
Matt Bergman, College of Education & Human Development, University of Louisville, Louisville, KY, USA
- 13 **Developing a Framework for Next Generation Integrated Agro Food-Advisory Systems in Developing Countries**  
Alcardo Alex Barakabitze, Sokoine University of Agriculture, Morogoro, Tanzania  
Kadeghe Goodluck Fue, Sokoine University of Agriculture, Morogoro, Tanzania  
Edvin Jonathan Kitindi, Sokoine University of Agriculture, Morogoro, Tanzania  
Camilius Aloyce Sanga, Sokoine University of Agriculture, Morogoro, Tanzania
- 32 **Exploring Identity Construction: Considerations of Student Identity Expression in Online Modalities**  
Michael Gallardo, California State University, Channel Islands, Camarillo, CA, USA  
J. Jacob Jenkins, California State University, Channel Islands, Camarillo, CA, USA  
Patrick J. Dillon, University of Memphis, Memphis, TN, USA
- 38 **Green Technologies Enabling Virtual Learning Environments**  
Rochell R. McWhorter, College of Business and Technology, The University of Texas at Tyler, Tyler, TX, USA  
Julie A. Delello, College of Education and Psychology, The University of Texas at Tyler, Tyler, TX, USA
- 56 **Health Information Technology and Quality Management**  
T. Ray Ruffin, School of Advanced Studies (SAS), University of Phoenix and Colorado Technical University, Colorado Springs, CO, University of Mount Olive, Mount Olive, NC & Wake Technical Community College, Raleigh, NC, USA

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# From Stopout to Scholar: Pathways to Graduation through Adult Degree Completion Programs

Matt Bergman, College of Education & Human Development, University of Louisville, Louisville, KY, USA

## ABSTRACT

Although colleges and universities are facing increased scrutiny to demonstrate a return on investment for their students, the demand for college-educated workers continues to grow. As of 2010, the U.S. Census Bureau estimated that more than one-fifth of Americans age 25 and older—around 43.5 million people—have some postsecondary education but no degree (Lumina, 2012). This article presents an integrative review of relevant, rigorous, and research based programs that create a fast path to degree completion for working adults. While national data still shows that postsecondary credentials remain a good investment for individuals and the overall economy (Carnevale & Rose, 2015), the public is asserting a greater demand for accountability as tuition continues to escalate well beyond the rate of inflation. This article provides a review and conceptual links to educational pathways for the large group of adult learners with some college and no degree.

## KEYWORDS

Adult Degree Completion Programs, Adult Learners, Asynchronous, Online Learning, Persistence

## INTRODUCTION

Consider that there are more than 162.3 million people in the United States workforce (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012). More than 43 million of those people are adult working age individuals (ages 25 and older) that have some college but no degree (Lumina, 2012). Yet, the U.S. labor market now requires postsecondary education for most entry-level positions and mid-level occupations and by 2018, 63% of jobs will need some form of postsecondary training (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2010). The U.S. economy will have jobs for 22 million workers with college degrees, but a shortage of about 3 million college graduates (Carnevale et al., 2010). These statistics show the growing need for more of the nation's workforce to earn postsecondary credentials. To that end, reputable institutions of higher learning must address the needs of working adults with relevant, rigorous, and research based programs that align with the workforce needs of each region throughout the United States.

While there is evidence of expanded adult focused offerings in traditional non-profit higher education, many for-profit institutions were the early adopters of adult friendly practices. Sadly, some of the less upstanding institutions in the for-profit market had engaged in unfair and predatory recruiting practices, poor quality degrees with few job prospects, and insurmountable debt for some students. Thankfully, the increased scrutiny and call for accountability in higher education is having positive results on both for-profit and non-profit institutions. In fall 2015, overall enrollment in U.S. colleges and universities decreased 1.7 percent from the previous fall 2014 (National Student Clearinghouse, 2015). The vast majority of this decline occurred in the for-profit sector with a 13.7 percent reduction in overall enrollment. Conversely, the four-year public enrollment remained flat at just over 8 million students (0.4% growth from prior year).

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The complexity of the challenges facing higher education has never been greater. The need for a systematic approach that focuses on the entire college completion population is clearly evident. Therefore, institutions of all type must enhance policies and practices that remove barriers for the 43 million Americans with some college and no degree so at least a portion of these working adults may enhance their educational attainment in a streamline and efficient manner. This effort would address this subset of the overall student body in American colleges and universities.

Whether one pursues a postsecondary certificate, associate's, or a bachelor's, there are increasing options that provide convenient and flexible pathways to achieving the long held goal of receiving a degree. Beyond economic concerns, there are important social and psychological reasons to improve the educational attainment of adults. For example, adults who attained a college degree not only make, on average, a million dollars more over their careers, but also reported healthier lifestyles and increased levels of civic engagement (Baum & Ma, 2007; Perna, 2005). Research shows that attainment of the degree can have wide implications for an adult students' social and psychological development. Their unemployment rates are also 30% lower than that of high school graduates with an unemployment rate of 2.5%, compared with all other persons at 8.3% (Turner & Krumenauer, 2010). College graduates also provide at least \$300,000 more over a lifetime in federal taxes (Adult Learning in Focus CAEL, 2008).

## **ADULT DEGREE COMPLETION PROGRAMS**

Adult Degree Completion Programs (ADCPs) are becoming increasingly relevant within the higher education community and are growing at a rapid pace across the nation (Taylor, 2000). According to the North Central Association's Higher Learning Commission Task Force on Adult Degree-Completion Programs (2000), an adult-degree completion program is one designed especially to meet the needs of the working adult who, having acquired sixty or more college credit hours during previous enrollments, is returning to school after an extended period of absence to obtain a baccalaureate degree. The institution's promise that the student will be able to complete the program in fewer than two years of continuous study is realized through provisions such as establishing alternative class schedules, truncating the traditional semester/quarter time frame, organizing student cohorts, and awarding credit for prior learning experiences equivalent to approximately 25% of the bachelor's degree credit total (Task Force, 2000). Adult degree programs share common characteristics including but not limited to: distance (online) options, evening course options, weekend course options, test-out (CLEP and DSST) options, and college credit for prior learning in the workplace.

Educational programs for adults are conducted for five primary purposes: to encourage continuous growth and development of individuals, to assist people in responding to practical problems and issues of adult life, to prepare people for current and future work opportunities, to assist organizations in achieving desired results and adapting to change, and to provide opportunities to examine community and societal issues (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). Closing the gap between theory and practice in undergraduate education is essential to ensuring the well being of individuals and the future of our society (Kuh, 2008). Among the best practices for both traditional and adult learners include outreach, financing, life and career planning, assessment of learning outcomes, teaching-learning process, student support systems, technology, and strategic partnership.

Changes in demographics are forcing colleges and universities to consider more adult-friendly practices in order to keep their doors open. Between 1970 and 1991, adult participation in higher education rose at a rate of 171.4%. Adult learners have steadily increased over the past three decades, to more than 45% of the total student population (Choy, 2002; Kasworm, 2003a). The U.S. Census Bureau (2008) reported that 53.8% of men and 61.1% of women between 25 and 29 years old have some college but no degree.

This significant number of adults with some college and no degree has created an adult degree completion program phenomenon and it is impacting thousands of institutions. Within the next twenty

years, estimates show that 25% of adult students will be enrolled in accelerated degree-completion programs (Wlodkowski, 2002). As such, institutions cannot afford to let adult degree completion programs operate on the periphery of their traditional curricula.

Many adults can enhance their lives through the completion of these programs, which are an attractive option because of the reduced barriers to degree completion. Flexible evening and weekend courses alongside online course offerings accommodate the otherwise busy life schedules of adult learners. Nevertheless, barriers still remain and recent studies showed that accelerated degree programs produced a 40% six-year graduation rate (Wlodkowski et al, 2001). Therefore, 60% of adults still withdraw prior to graduation. These statistics rival the national average of degree completion among traditional-age students. If adults persist at the same or lower rate than their traditional counterparts, how much do degree completion programs actually help remove barriers to adult student success?

The following is an overview of the Principles of Good Practice for Alternative and External Degree Programs for Adults (Adult Education Alliance, 1998):

1. The program has a mission statement that reflects an educational philosophy, goals, purposes, and general intent and clearly complements the institutional mission.
2. Faculty and academic professionals working in alternative and external degree programs share a commitment to serve adult learners and have the attitudes, knowledge, and skills required to reach, advise, counsel, and assist such students.
3. Clearly articulated programmatic learning outcomes frame the comprehensive curriculum as well as specific learning experiences; in developing these outcomes, the program incorporates general student goals.
4. The program is designed to provide diverse learning experiences that respond to the characteristics and contexts of adult learners while meeting established academic standards.
5. The assessment of a student's learning is used to determine the achievement of comprehensive and specific learning outcomes (pp. 6-8).

The statements referenced in the list above are taken from the document, Principles of Good Practice for Alternative and External Degree Programs for Adults, published by the American Council on Education and the Alliance: An Association for Alternative Degree Programs for Adults (1990). The organizational name of the Alliance was changed to the Adult Higher Education Alliance in 1998.

ADCPs prepare individuals for responsibilities in vocational, business, services, governmental, and industrial occupations, as well as other related fields. They are targeted towards a variety of individuals, including those who are already employed; desire to change their employment; strive for advancement and do not have a "needed" bachelor's degree; planning careers in mid-management in business, banking, and industry plan; to advance in public service (such as legal assistance employment); intend to move into administrative positions in local, state or federal governmental positions (i.e. customs, border patrol, legal or court systems) or health professions; or intend to manage or open their own business or workshop (Taylor, 2000).

Another distinctive feature of many adult degree completion programs is the acknowledgement and awarding of college credits for military training, workplace experiential learning, certifications, licenses, and other experiential learning through a Prior Learning Assessment portfolio credit. These portfolio-based credits have been empirically shown to accelerate pace to degree and improve percentage of graduation of those adult learners that engage in and receive credits for prior learning (CAEL, 2011). The curriculum of many adult degree completion programs strives to develop intrapersonal (self-concept) and interpersonal (relationship) dimensions of a student. The introductions of these innovative programs tailor a unique and streamlined approach to working adults that intend to finish a baccalaureate degree.

In this article, the author shares the specific ways in which Adult Degree Completion Programs provide excellence in access, efficiency, and cost effectiveness.

## ACCESS

For more than 100 years, almost 50% of college students have failed to persist to graduation (ACT, 2010; Tinto, 1993; U.S. Department of Education, 2008). To make matters worse, adult students persist at lower rates than that of their traditional counterparts. While adult learners occupy a growing percentage of total enrollments at U.S. colleges and universities, they continue to represent a much smaller segment of the published literature (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). Despite this, the relevance of adult learners to the viability of many institutions of higher learning is becoming increasingly evident. New degree programs and institutions that offer convenient and flexible degree programs have been established to serve the influx of this often neglected subpopulation of students. The response, however, has not been sufficient. The gap in literature suggests that academics, practitioners, and policy-makers must examine how the academy attracts and retains adult learners. Institutions that develop meaningful professional partnerships to facilitate the educational needs of the workforce strengthen their ability to complete in the marketplace, increase access to the university, and embed the university in the community (Feldman, 2004). Well-planned, convenient, and flexible programs offering excellent instruction and high-level student services are the most effective in their ability to successfully deliver degree-granting programs, thus addressing the age-old problem of student retention (Wlodkowski, 2001).

While universities are scrambling to increase retention, they are experiencing little success. Retention rates are remaining flat or even declining, indicating that there is a need for further investigation of the problem (ACT, 2010). Adult students, in particular, indicate they want more flexible delivery options including online, evening, and weekend courses. The U.S. economy has moved away from the strong manufacturing labor market that existed 30 years ago. Today the workplace is a technologically focused environment, where knowledge-based jobs are driving the demand for a new kind of skilled laborer (Atkinson & Correa, 2007; Carey, 2004; Childress et al., 2008). Atkinson and Correa (2007) have identified these knowledge-based workers as the engine driving the economic and technological futures of most organizations, allowing them to compete in the global economy. Consequently, higher education can play an integral role in developing knowledge-based workers for knowledge-based jobs in a more technology-based workplace.

Specifically, these adult-focused programs focus on leadership and development issues in organizations, exposing students to new and different ways of thinking and problem-solving, while considering the context and experience that they bring to the classroom (in-class or online). Because many students in adult degree completion programs complete a course fully online at some point in their academic career, they are also exposed to a rigorous educational process delivered asynchronously or synchronously. The exposure to course content via an online platform, interaction with students and faculty online, and the development of a learning community at a distance equips students not only with content knowledge, but also with technical prowess that is necessary in a technology-based workplace. Despite the relative ease of access and clear benefits of higher education, challenges still exist with educating an adult population.

Adult learners are encompassing an increasing percentage of the total enrollment in today's colleges and universities, however, they continue to be the least understood (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Kasworm, 2005), the most difficult to recruit (Hadfield, 2003), and the least likely to persist (Donaldson & Graham, 1990; Justice & Dornan, 2001; National Adult Attitudes Report, 2008). While the complexities of traditional student departure decisions have been studied extensively, the same cannot be said for adult student retention. Even less research can be found on student retention in adult degree completion programs (Tweedell, 2000; Wlodkowski, 2002). Understanding how entry/background, internal campus/academic environment, and external environment variables interact can assist colleges and universities identify at-risk students and implement interventions that support adult students, who are more likely to leave an institution. Additional research can also help local and state officials identify new policies that promote adult student persistence to improve bachelor

degree attainment rates in all types of American colleges and Universities. As changes in the global marketplace drive adult students back into the classroom, it is necessary that institutions of higher learning provide appropriate services and resources to ensure these adults attain a baccalaureate degree (Hoffman & Reindl, 2011).

## **EFFICIENCY**

Many Adult Degree Completion Programs (ADCPs) implement innovative practices to accelerate bachelor degree attainment for any adult with some college and no degree. In fact, the program's retention rates often grow based upon the convenient and flexible approach to educational delivery. These results are often reached by employing technology-based approaches to improve degree completion rates by offering all coursework asynchronously. In other words, any student can log on and complete the course work whenever they have space to complete the assignments in any given course. Many adult-friendly universities support this endeavor by contributing large budgets to technology via learning management systems and specific university-wide Online Learning Departments, which provide extensive resources for both full-time and part-time faculty teaching online courses. Needless to say, these models are employed across a vast array of colleges and universities but have varying levels of documented success. Although ADCPs serve students from across the globe, they only reach the tip of the iceberg based upon the fact that we have 43 million Americans with some college and no degree. Discussions continue to take place within the academic community about the effectiveness of purely online asynchronous content but evidence suggests that quality learning can still take place with asynchronous delivery methodology (Chen & Shaw, 2006). Additionally, synchronous delivery, while exceptionally useful as a developmental tool, can limit access for students in different time zones or with competing work, family, and community commitments.

Moreover, Adult Degree Completion Programs are often standards based, with all courses designed to incorporate discipline specific standards and accreditation. Students in many adult-specific classes must demonstrate mastery of the standards and learning outcomes throughout the programs by submitting a field-based assessment project for each course, which is captured into an overall program portfolio. Field-based assignments serve as baseline assessments for programs to capture student performance data, and they also serve as professional portfolio-builders for the students. Each field based assignment uses a rubric aligned with learner outcomes and standards and is used to provide student performance data directly related to program standards and outcomes.

These adult-friendly programs have undergone an extensive evolution in the adult education field through partnership with the Council on Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL), the American Association for Adult and Continuing Education (AAACE), and the Association for Continuing Higher Education (ACHE) along with many other professional organizations committed to adult student achievement. ADCP faculty and staff members are often well versed in the principles of andragogy (adult learning) (Knowles, 1980). In alignment with the curriculum, all ADCP online courses incorporate adult learning principles and best practices in online learning into the design of each course. For example, the courses are structured in an easy-to-use manner with a consistent format and weekly schedule so that students have clear expectations about what to expect, where to find materials and assignments, and where and when to submit assignments. ADCP faculty members often offer optional synchronous learning sessions using web-conferencing technology as well as online chat in their courses. Many courses require group work in private study group discussion areas, to facilitate student development of increasingly important virtual team-building skills.

In alignment with these efforts to support adult learners, the ADCPs take an innovative approach to curriculum delivery by catering the program to working adults in a variety of ways, including convenient evening and online course options. A student may take all courses from this program completely online, in the evening, or a mixture that meets the needs of each adult learner.

ADCP content is often driven by three fundamental principles in its curriculum design: relevance, rigor, and research. Each course in an ADCP has been thoughtfully designed to follow a template which addresses these three principles, including a scholar-practitioner emphasis in the course objectives, readings, and field-based assignments, detailed rubrics by which learning is evaluated, and the scholarly research upon which assignments and objectives are based. ADCP faculty members generally embrace that this relevant, rigorous, and research-based curriculum and method of formal education in and effort to usher in a new level of leaders for the changing and dynamic global workforce.

ADCPs often incorporate off campus and online offerings to meet the demand of local and distance adult learners. An interdisciplinary approach is employed to maximize the credit from transfer or returning student to his or her home institution. Adult learners can choose concentrations to help them reflect on past knowledge, build their skills for a changing workforce, and explore new concepts through hands-on projects and direct application of knowledge. In the first course upon return to the academic setting, students may evaluate and document their learning from work experiences, existing course credits and associate degrees, and technical and specialized training to receive additional college credit from credit worthy experiential learning. Individuals may earn credit hours in the areas where they have college level and credit worthy learning from outside the confines of the university. This course often takes shape in a 1 to 3 credit hour guided course to develop a Portfolio of Prior Learning. Students then proceed to the remaining courses in a structured and efficient program of study of their choosing. ADCPs have also worked extensively to actively engage military personnel by establishing Offices of Military and Veteran Student Services. These on campus and virtual offices are generally staffed with a full-time academic advisor and community outreach specialist. This military outreach aligns directly with adult-friendly programs' commitment to serving military students and civilians who support military operations.

## **COST EFFECTIVENESS**

Adult Degree Completion Programs offer a cost-effective means for adult students to realize their goals of completing their undergraduate degree. Once admitted to the programs, oftentimes the first major course evaluates and documents the student's learning from military or industry experience, existing course credits, associate degrees and specialized training, utilizing accepted industry and educational standards to earn credit hours in their specialization/portfolio component. This approach is very effective in limiting the time and expense a traditional degree might propose. Adding in the benefit of fully online classes, reducing transportation and parking costs and travel time, the cost benefit of these programs to working professionals is self-evident. The entire assessment process is often handled with online instruction and comes at no cost to the adult learner to post the earned experiential credit.

It should be noted; online classes across many ADCPs are delivered with a cost-recovery model, making online courses slightly more expensive than traditional face-to-face courses. The additional funds from online courses are sometimes distributed among the departments, library, the central institution and the online learning department to specifically support distance learning efforts at all levels in the institution including supporting the Learning Management System and its support mechanisms.

In an effort to provide maximum access and cost-effectiveness to military students, many of whom are serving overseas, ADCPs offer a reduced tuition rate for students serving full-time in the military that matches their distributed funds. Thus, active duty military learners can attend online courses for \$250 per credit hour, which does not exceed their military tuition assistance allotment.

In a recent empirical study of adult learners in a degree completion program, Bergman (2012) investigated the rank order responses regarding the reasons for returning to complete a bachelor's degree. The results of this study indicated that a majority of adult students in the study identified personal fulfillment as the most important reason for returning to complete a degree, followed by



work advancement and the desire to inspire their children/family. Based on these findings and other research on adult learners (Bergman, Gross, Berry, & Shuck, 2014; Merriam et al., 2007), it is apparent that the emotional component must be acknowledged and addressed when marketing the ADCPs for the target population of adult learners. Adults often want to finish their degree to fulfill a long held personal goal. This is a compelling message and one that should be honored as ADCPs move forward in reaching adult students and helping them achieve their long-term goals.

More students in the United States attain degrees of higher education than anywhere else in the world. However, degree-attainment levels are increasing in every industrialized or post-industrial country in the world except the United States (Lumina Foundation, 2011). This nation is determined to produce regions throughout the country that are economically attractive to businesses around the world. Simply waiting for youth to fill the workforce needs, however, will not meet the demands of this rapidly changing economic landscape (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). Thus, it is important to understand the obstacles faced by adult students who return to the academic setting to pursue bachelor's degrees. Various work, family, financial, and community responsibilities have been shown to impact attrition and persistence behavior of adult learners. These ADCPs have extensively examined these factors and how they interact to increase or decrease likelihood of persistence to graduation among adult learners.

This intense national commitment to increase college attainment needs to be matched by an equally intense focus on quality or, more specifically, on the kinds and levels of learning that degree attainment is supposed to represent. Degree completion must mean that students have demonstrated—cumulatively, over time—their acquisition of the knowledge and skills they will need for the complex and fast-changing challenges of work, citizenship, and contemporary life.

ADCPs have been numerous in their early adoption of extensive online teaching to reach greater numbers of working adult learners. To promote continuous improvement of the quality of online courses in ADCPs, many have adopted the Quality Matters rubric for the design of online courses. Using the quality matters rubric as the outline, ADCP faculty incorporate and redesign their course content to enhance the Quality Matters concepts. Many ADCPs adopt user friendly Learning Management Systems that provide additional software to be used by distance courses, including Blackboard Collaborate (an integrated web-conferencing tool formerly known as Wimba) that is heavily used by the program for collaboration sessions and office hours. Tegrity course capture software, Learning Objects Campus Pack, a blog and wiki tool and a variety of other ancillary software that all courses can choose from. The Online Learning Departments often provide direct support and training for ADCP faculty and staff, which comes in the form of face-to-face, small group, asynchronous and synchronous online instruction. Help is generally available to online students 24/7 through the institution's help desk and through self-help documentation and videos at the Online Learning Departmental site. ADCPs also provides direct support to adult learners with a professional program coordinator and an academic counselor dedicated to the needs of its online students.

## CONCLUSION

Despite the important research on adult and nontraditional attrition, scholars have failed to study this subpopulation closely enough. No single group is more important to the viability of higher education as an industry and the reasons for adult student attrition stem from complex and diverse intervening variables (Tweedell, 2000). Moreover, Tinto (1993) posited that much of what we think we know about student recruitment and retention is wrong or at least misleading and a good deal of literature is filled with stereotypical portraits of those student dropouts. Institutions of higher education are still unable to make sense of student departure because so much remains unknown about its longitudinal character and the complex interplay of forces that lead students to drop out (Tinto, 1993). As the number of traditional students continues to decrease, the need for a better understanding of adult students has deepened.

It is important to take the type of institution into consideration when studying adult specific programming. Highly selective institutions have more full-time residential students with higher academic aptitude than less-selective institutions. Thus, students at prestigious institutions are retained at greater rates than that of open enrollment, two-year, and for-profit institutions. Along this line of thought, adult learners make up a miniscule percentage of the populations at highly selective institutions. Nontraditional students often enroll in college during a period of transition, e.g., during a divorce, change in job or career, pregnancy or recent birth of a child, young children becoming more independent, or older children leaving the home (Kasworm, 2003). Adults do not have the luxury of attending highly selective schools or progressing through the academic experience in a linear fashion. Although prestigious private institutions boast strong enrollment growth and high academic standards, other less selective, tuition-driven institutions struggle to make budgetary goals each year and teeter on the brink of closing their doors.

In addition, this body of research highlights the importance of categorizing student withdrawal classifications more precisely, with descriptors such as transfer-out, stopout, and dropout. While most research on adult learners focuses on student characteristics or retention strategies, very few address the decision-making process adults engage when they consider reentering higher education (Donaldson & Townsend, 2007). Mishler and Davenport's (1983) study of older students who had entered college and completed a bachelor's degree found the two most important reasons for returning were to develop skills for a new career (26%), and the satisfaction of having the degree (18%). Additionally, the participants indicated earning a degree (58%) and developing job skills (54%) were very important to them. These findings highlight the fundamental value adult learners place on earning a degree. Older individuals have a stronger learning goal orientation, whereas younger learners exhibit a greater performance orientation (Eppler & Harju, 1997). Thus, studies focused on relevant and applicable course content that relates directly to the workforce in the form of degree completion programming will add value to this field of study.

One unifying assumption held by most scholars is the fact that adult learners are highly pragmatic in their approach to educational attainment (Thomas & Chickering, 1984). They hold more real-world experience to contribute to their own learning process, and they have well-defined needs that place a utilitarian approach into much of their academic decision-making (Knowles, et al., 2011).

ADCPs looking to increase persistence could conduct an analysis using the newly developed Theory of Adult Learner Persistence in Degree Completion Programs model (Bergman, et. Al, 2014). Research provides support for utilizing each of the variables examined for the development of specific action-oriented interventions to aid in adult student persistence. Development of policy at the institutional, local, state, and national level could result from the data analysis of age, ethnicity, educational goal, PLA credits, financial aid, active learning, institutional support, and external influences of adult learners in degree completion programs. Further study could provide avenues toward innovative student tracking via an early alert system to provide intervention for adult learners. Thus, colleges and universities could improve their adult retention and graduation rates in comparison to those for traditionally aged students. This could be accomplished by initiating contact via Facebook, text alerts, and/or downloadable calendars compatible with smartphones and Outlook in order to maintain contact with adults and keep them engaged and invested in their academic progression to graduation. In general, better use of technology to increase student access and degree attainment should have been seen as an overall positive endeavor. Institutions should also consider tracking graduation and employment statistics to realize the success and/or failure of programs so that they may provide students a better understanding of what they can expect from the learning outcomes and credentials received from individual degree completion programs. Producing more accountability for each program would also promote a culture of discipline encouraging students to become more accountable for their learning and educational attainment.

Furthermore, there is always a demand for additional convenience options including weekend and online course offerings while maintaining the rigor of the academic curriculum. The value that

these students place on flexible course options and prior learning assessment mirrors that of previous research and advances the case for creating adult-friendly practice nationwide. The ability to integrate credit for prior learning through experiential credit evaluation helps relieve some of the fears and anxiety of returning adults and empowers them through the reflection on the depth and breadth of learning they already have accumulated. It also debunks many misconceptions about the requirements of undergraduate study. Because many adults in degree completion programs have failed in previous attempts as traditional age students, they often feel nervous about their ability to complete formal academic work at a high level. Although the reintegration into a formal academic setting is challenging, many adult learners indicated that it is no more overwhelming than their current workload in their current job. Thus, orientation and prior learning assessment courses provide an avenue for adults to assimilate into a world in which they often were not previously successful.

Another key issue expressed in both research and practice is the need to address affordability and accessibility. Although progress has been made on finding additional scholarships, grants, and loans specifically for adults, the amount of funding in comparison to that of traditional high school seniors is miniscule. Since more and more students are exhibiting more nontraditional characteristics, it necessary for institutions and legislature to designate more aid for this growing population. The federal government has made strides in its reform of the G.I. Bill but adults outside of the military and lower socioeconomic groups find it difficult to secure to scholarships or financial aid.

Lastly, adult students often illuminate the value placed on faculty and staff to aid in their continued enrollment and eventual graduation. Adults have little to no time to integrate in co-curricular activities on campus, so having a single point of contact or familiar office can build a relationship that helps foster success. Even though the advisor or faculty member might not remain the key contact once a student is enrolled, adults often maintain their relationships with faculty and staff throughout their college experience, continuing to seek assistance and support from these individuals until they graduate. Students have indicated that having someone available to listen to them and try to answer their questions is often enough to help them stay enrolled. Therefore, an essential component of any degree completion program is a single or small group of academic or faculty advisors available for timely and knowledgeable feedback.

In conclusion, it is essential that ADCPs seeking to increase enrollment, retention, and graduation of adult students focus on the individuals that deliver the student services and the curriculum to the adult learners. Adults are focused on real-world relevance and expect a level of service that they receive in the business environment. Unfortunately, the innovative student support and learning strategies described above are rarely found in traditional university programs (Ross-Gordon, 2011). Therefore, it is essential that more adult friendly practices (prior learning assessment, convenient course options, and evening and online student support) become integrated into the fabric of traditional four-year colleges and universities. If programs are able to manage the demands of students that identify as worker, spouse or partner, parent, caregiver, and community member with timely and informed feedback and guidance, higher levels of student persistence is sure to follow.

### **Author's Note**

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