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Motivating Adult Learners: Exploring the Emergence of Adult Business Students in an East Texas University

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Abstract

Adult enrollment in higher education institutions has grown significantly during the last decade, with students aged 25 and older attending 4-year institutions at higher rates than before. In the 21st century, few can improve their socioeconomic status or advance professionally without higher education. Colleges and universities must consider this diverse student population by identifying new modes of motivation for students to pursue degrees at 4-year institutions. Research suggests that universities focus on the new learners of higher education: nontraditional students who are motivated by their desire to learn and advance professionally. This study examined motivational factors and patterns of students who pursued degrees in accounting, finance, management, marketing, or general business programs at a university in Texas. The survey results indicated that most participants worked 31 to 40 hours per week, and one-third had incomes of \$60,000 and above. The researchers found a statistical multivariate effect of income on motivation to pursue a degree; however, no statistical difference existed among gender, age, occupation, or program of study.

Key words: adult learners, nontraditional students, higher education, motivation, business

Adult enrollment in higher education institutions has grown significantly in the early 21st century, with students aged 25 and older attending 4-year higher education institutions at higher rates than they did in the past. Bundy and Smith (2004) noted that economic, workforce, and distance-learning factors contribute to the high rate of adult learners who are motivated to continue their education. Advanced education is essential to improve socioeconomic status or to progress professionally, and many adult learners are motivated by the desire to become more visible and marketable in the current competitive professional landscape. Considering the increase in adult students in higher education, researchers have investigated student motivators, the value they bring to their studies, and their subsequent wants and needs (Compton, Cox, & Laanan, 2006; Cross, 2004; Mbilinyi, 2006) to provide colleges and universities with recommendations for educational programs

and services that meet the needs of this population.

Researchers have argued that motivation significantly influences adult learners (Analoui, 2000; Aslanian, 2006; Wlodkowski, 2008). Research has also consistently reported encouraging and healthy connections between learners' motivational levels and educational success in traditional classroom environments (Patterson, 2000). In this regard, Patterson (2000) suggested that adult students have primary learning objective styles, and learning styles that are effective in the classroom environment. Analoui (2000) described learning as the act, method, or skill of gaining knowledge. Presenting information in a way that allows adult learners to obtain knowledge is the test, and part of this challenge is that adults learn in a variety of ways (e.g., by seeing, hearing, talking, writing, and doing) (Analoui, 2000).

Motivation has a significant influence on adult learners because it enhances and mediates learning during instruction and is a consequence of the learning. According to Wlodkowski (2008), motivational aspects of one's learning experiences influence his or her inclination toward lifelong learning. This idea is important because there is increasing emphasis on lifelong learning as society calls for a more skilled workforce.

Adult Locus of Control and Self-Efficacy

Findley and Cooper (1983) suggested that adult learners possess a locus of control (LOC) that can be described as one of the most determining elements of personality. In fact, the concept of self-efficacy or an individual's belief in his or her own abilities can be classified into internal or external LOC (Findley & Cooper, 1983). Internal LOC refers to feeling personally responsible for the events in one's life; conversely, external LOC refers to the sense that forces beyond the individual's control are the cause of life events (Findley & Cooper, 1983). Generally, individuals fall between these two extremes and form a continuous distribution of LOC beliefs. While LOC is a relatively stable characteristic, it is modifiable through experience (Findley & Cooper, 1983; Miltiadou & Savenye, 2003).

Adults who display a strong internal LOC consider successes or failures as they are related to their own efforts and abilities. On the other hand, adults who display a strong external LOC feel the events in their lives are beyond their control (Miltiadou & Savenye, 2003). Further, LOC is viewed as a behavioral trait that influences individuals' perceptions of their academic learning and overall achievement.

Other attributes of successful learners include valuing and being committed to learning. For intrinsically motivated learners, the reward is often deeper insight or understanding. Additionally, an individual's perceptions of competence and self-efficacy are important when pursuing academic goals. For example, Compton et al. (2006) found that adult learners were more likely to participate in activities that they knew they could accomplish successfully. They explained that distance education might hinder students who lack motivation because of feelings of incompetence. In addition, adult learners may become uncomfortable or lose confidence in their abilities to make the necessary decisions when given full control over their learning.

The purpose of this study was to examine the motivational factors of students who pursue degrees in

accounting, finance, management, marketing, or general business programs at a 4-year institution. Specifically, this research addressed the following questions:

- What factors motivate adult business students to attend a 4-year university?
- Does a business discipline affect learners' motivations in pursuing their degrees?
- Do gender and age affect adult learners' motivations in pursuing degrees in business?
- Does occupation affect adult learners' motivations in pursuing degrees in business?
- Does income affect adult learners' motivations in pursuing degrees in business?

Design of Study

The researchers used a quantitative research method to determine which motivational factors are associated with nontraditional students' (NTS) desires to pursue degrees in business disciplines. Using a quantitative approach, the researchers attempted to draw conclusions about a large population using a smaller representative sample (Field, 2013). The specific design of this study was a cross-sectional survey. Field (2013) proposed that a cross-sectional study had the advantage of providing a snapshot of a defined population. Further, this method allowed the researchers to estimate the range of the problem in a sample population and identify the risk factors involved. While the nature of cause-and-effect relationships cannot be established, the cross-sectional design is a useful instrument for generating hypotheses to test in future studies.

Development and Validity of the Instrument

The researchers developed the instrument as two sections. Section I included 24 questions to determine the constructs associated with factors that influenced participants' decisions to pursue higher education. Section II included eight questions to determine basic demographic information about respondents, including gender, credit hours attempted, occupation, hours worked per week, years of service, annual income, age, and program of study.

The validity of the survey instrument was assessed using a panel of experts from the Advising Adult Learners Commission (AALC). The panel of experts was comprised of academic professionals whose goal is to encourage and support education and advocate for adult learners and included an Academic Advisor from Cal Poly Pomona University, an Assistant Director of Academic Advisement from Western Connecticut State University, a Counselor from Santa Barbara City College, an Associate Dean of the College of Business and Management from Cardinal Stritch University, and a Transfer Advisor College of Liberal Arts from the University of Connecticut.

The panel of independent experts created and examined each question by email over the course of three weeks to test the validity of each item, subsequently categorizing each question into the five motivational categories. The categories were (a) advance professionally; (b) educational achievement; (c) personal fulfillment; (d) job security; and (e) increase income. Each question examined by the

independent experts was categorized, based on the five motivational categories, and coded. The survey instrument was sent out twice to the panel of experts to test the validity of the instrument. Reliability of the instrument will come with its usage.

Description of Sample Population

The sample for this study included nontraditional adult business students enrolled at an East Texas University. The sample size is the number of observations in a sample (Field, 2005), and is it commonly denoted with n . For this experiment, a sample size of $n = 383$ was used for this study. Of those, 149 met the criteria for participation. Nontraditional students referred to those who were older than the 18-24 college-aged students that delayed beginning or returning to college for various reasons, such as not having a high school diploma, working full-time, or tending to family obligations. They were enrolled in at least 12 semester hours. The sample size supported a 0.05 alpha level of significance for inclusion of factors in the model and allowed the researchers to establish statistical significance of the analysis using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS® 21.0).

Collection of Data

Data collection began on February 1, 2014, and continued to July 15, 2014. The researchers used a web-based delivery system, Survey Monkey, to distribute the questionnaire. Survey Monkey is an online system used by researchers to create instruments, distribute surveys, and collect results securely (Survey Monkey, 2009). The researchers emailed potential participants a link to the survey, which included an informed consent letter and the questionnaires.

Treatment of Data

When the survey site was closed, data were downloaded from Survey Monkey into an Excel spreadsheet. Data were examined and transferred into the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS® 21.0) for manipulation. Demographic information and descriptive statistics were examined and coded for analysis. The number and percent of participants in demographic categories were reported and discussed.

To answer Research Question 1, “What factors motivate adult business students to attend a 4-year university?” the mean scores and standard deviations for the five measured motivational factors of advance professionally, educational achievement, personal growth, increase income, and job security were discussed. Comparisons were made and factors with the highest and lowest means were described.

The remainder of the research questions were analyzed using multivariate analyses of variance (MANOVAs) with the five motivational factors listed above as the dependent variables. A MANOVA was the appropriate statistical test because this study examined five interrelated dependent including interval-ratio level data and independent variables including multiple groups (Field, 2013). Because the sample sizes were unequal, the SPSS General Linear Model syntax was altered as recommended by

Tabachnick and Fidell (2013) to use Type 2 Sums of Squares rather than Type 3.

Wilks' Lambda was used to determine overall significance because group sizes were not equal. Assumptions for all MANOVAs were checked using Levene's Test of Equality of Error Variances to assess homogeneity of group scores on the five constructs. The homogeneity of the variance-covariance matrix was assessed with Box's M. Tabachnick and Fidell (2013) suggested that, for unequal sample sizes among levels of independent variables, as was the case for the current sample, a Box's M test with a $p < .001$ should be used as the criteria for determining whether this assumption is met. For significant MANOVAs, the pairwise comparisons were conducted. Effect size was calculated with eta-squared (η^2).

To answer Research Question 2, "Does a business discipline affect learners' motivations in pursuing their degrees?" type of business discipline was the independent variable. Because of the small number of students in finance and accounting, these two disciplines were combined to form one group. The other three groups remained intact. The dependent variables were the five motivational factors.

To answer Research Question 3, "Do gender and age affect adult learners' motivations in pursuing degrees in business?" gender and age were the independent variables. Respondents' ages were listed in 10-year increments, beginning with 25-35 years of age. The 46-55 and 56 and above age groups had few participants; therefore, they were combined to form one group. A two-way MANOVA was conducted with the five motivational factors as the dependent variables.

To answer Research Question 4, "Does occupation affect adult learners' motivations in pursuing degrees in business?" the independent variable was occupation. Occupations were coded into four groups: management, staff-professional, administrative, and other. The dependent variables were the five motivational factors.

To answer Research Question 5, "Does income affect adult learners' motivations in pursuing degrees in business?" the independent variable was income. Income was coded into four yearly income groups, including less than \$30,000, \$30,001–\$45,000, \$45,001–\$60,000, and \$60,001 or above. The dependent variables were the five motivational factors.

Conclusions

Bundy and Smith (2004) indicated that adult learners are increasingly concerned about having the knowledge and skills to remain competitive in the workforce; therefore, adult students often return to school to gain professional skills to meet the demands of the competitive workforce. Based on the findings, conclusions can be drawn to determine the motivational factors for the pursuit of higher education and to determine whether gender, age, occupation, income, and program of study affect these factors.

Based on the current data, the most important factors in the pursuit of higher education were advance professionally, increase income, job security, and personal fulfillment. These factors did not differ significantly from each other except when comparing income groups. However, educational

achievement differed significantly from the other items because the mean score for this factor was the lowest of the five motivational factors in all analyses.

While Fairchild (2003) focused on barriers and challenges to pursuing a degree, few studies have focused on motivation of adults and their perceptions of pursuing their degrees. Nontraditional adult learners face multiple motivational challenges when deciding to return to school, including family responsibilities, work commitments, and school hours (Fairchild, 2003; Hoyt & Allred, 2008; Kasworm et al., 2002). Based on the findings from this study, educational achievement had little effect on motivation to pursue a degree; therefore, the researchers concluded the following:

1. Research Question 1 was consistent with Compton et al. (2006) and Eduventures (2008) in that adult learners are motivated more by increasing income and having job security. On the other hand, adult learners are less motivated by educational achievement, which had little effect on participants' reasons for pursuing higher education.
2. Research Question 2 was consistent with Heelan (2001), Kerka (2001), and Cross (2004) in that adult learners choose disciplines to help them become well-informed individuals, to prepare for a new or current job, and to carry out everyday tasks at home.
3. Research Question 3 was consistent with Aslanian (2006) in that no significant differences existed between gender and age groups on any motivational factor examined. More women than men were enrolled in classes full-time in a business discipline. Additionally, half the sample population surveyed in this study was between the ages of 25 and 35 years old.
4. Research Question 4 was not consistent with Timarong et al. (2002) because educational achievement did not motivate the current participants to strengthen their job skills or to progress in the workplace through job expansions and job placement. Although improving educational skills is an important factor in the growing demand for increased competencies in the workforce, the researchers found that Non Traditional Students' (NTS) were not motivated to enhance their academic achievement in pursuing a degree.
5. A main factor that contributed to this study was the need for NTS to work while in school. This finding is consistent with Aslanian (2006) and Berker and Horn (2004). Adult learners spend 40 or more hours per week working to support financial responsibilities. This motivational factor accounted for adult learners' motivations to return to school.

Implications

The researchers found the results interesting because personal experiences in a corporate career have shown that factors such as job security and increasing income are significant motivators to pursuing education. For many, these researchers included, advancing professionally, educational achievement, and personal fulfillment are not often the overriding factors that propel one to succeed in the corporate environment. While the data clearly indicated that the majority of adult learners in this study were pursuing their degrees to increase their income or to ensure job security, it is also important to understand that nontraditional students are motivated to pursue degrees based on academic abilities.

From an institutional perspective, the current results can assist those who counsel and advise adult students. Specifically, these results may enable counselors or advisors to detect students' motivations more easily and, thus, provide them with better advisement. Additionally, this knowledge can assist administrators in determining ways to attract adults to and inform adults of education opportunities.

From a faculty perspective, adult learners are increasingly diverse, and, in the context of multiple perspectives, various backgrounds, and different levels of preparedness among nontraditional students, the researchers recommend that faculty use a variety of teaching strategies in the classroom and participate in workshops about teaching techniques for adult learners. The findings indicate that students benefit when they are able to complete their programs of study and obtain their degrees (Hoyt & Allred, 2008).

From a student perspective, institutions should be cognizant of adult learners' motivating factors as they proceed through their programs of study. Institutions could provide guidance to both administrators and faculty regarding students' needs and offer them strategies on how to proceed or to adapt to meet those needs. The researchers also recommend that adults learn about and understand the academic requirements at the institutions they choose to attend (Berker & Horn, 2004).

While it is commendable that administrators continually seek ways to motivate adult learners to pursue a degree, educators should be encouraged that adult learners benefit in most areas regardless of whether they graduate. Perhaps, administrators should not be overly concerned with students leaving college prior to graduation, but rather, should focus their efforts on keeping educational opportunities available for adult learners to pursue their degrees.

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