Chapter 79
No Adult Left Behind:
Older Adults in Virtual Environments

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ABSTRACT

With an aging population and the increasing role of virtual technologies in education, educators and educational institutions need to be informed about contemporary and predicted demographics regarding older adults as learners as well as what is currently understood about learning later in life. Although recently increasing, there has been a lack of attention paid to this demographic group. A literature review reveals that "older" students are often those age 25 to 30, while the fastest growing segment of the population is much older. Truly "older" learners can and should be accommodated in the virtual environments that are becoming more and more common in higher and continuing education. The purpose of this chapter is to offer guidance for adult learning professionals tasked with accommodating older adults in virtual environments.

INTRODUCTION

Who are the older adults you might encounter in a virtual learning environment? When you consider this question, what image comes to your mind? If you base your determination of who is an *older* adult on social roles, you might picture someone who is at or near retirement age. If you are guided by physical status you might equate being *older* with having gray hair and diminished strength.

Both of those choices more or less comport with how older adulthood is defined by demographers and by practitioners in many helping professions. Older adults who fit these descriptions are the fastest growing segment of the population (United States Census Bureau, 2011). On the other hand, if you apply the boundaries of age typically used to describe non-traditional students to come up with an image of an *older* adult in a learning environment, you could be picturing someone barely out of adolescence.

A quick online search reveals that most education policy makers and those who write about them consider students as young as those in their early to mid-twenties to be older students. Here are just a few examples: In an online news article ostensibly on college completion rates for older adults, the data cited was based on a survey of students age 23 and older (Schepp, 2012). A recent ranking of colleges included the category of 'campuses with the most students over 25' (U. S. News, 2013). And, predictions for the future made by the United States government regarding the expected increase in the number of older students in college also uses 25 as the cutoff age (Blog for Enrollment and Student Success, 2011). Other sources, however, foreshadow an influx of considerably older students who will need to be accommodated by higher education institutions of all types (Cruce & Hillman, 2012).

In this discussion, the term *older adult* will be used to refer to *post-employment* adults. Post-employment adult learners are at or near retirement age and may be fully or semi-retired, working in or seeking a new career path, or engaging in learning activities to enrich their personal lives.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this chapter is to offer guidance for professionals tasked with accommodating older learners in virtual environments and to suggest answers to questions such as the following:

- Who are 'older adults' and why are they an important demographic?
- What are the learning dynamics unique to this demographic group?
- Why and where do they participate in virtual learning environments?
- What are the barriers, limitations and challenges they encounter?
- What advantages do they have?

- What are the best practices to use to respond to their needs and to facilitate their skill sets?
- What role does the so-called *digital divide* play?

BACKGROUND

The subject of adult education does not lend itself to emotional debates between adversarial movements or the invention of catchy phrases of the type inspired by the on-going debate over the public education of children and youth.

In 2001 Congress passed the public elementary and secondary education policy act known as *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) and it became law in 2002. The name of the act was apparently chosen because it reflected the intention of its advocates to use it to remedy the problem of growing achievement disparities between students from lower incomes and certain minority populations compared to their peers in other demographic groups (The White House: Office Of The Press Secretary, 2007). The memorable phrase used in the title may have been based on words used in speeches given in the 1990s by Marian Wright Edelman, founder of the Children's Defense Fund. Ms. Edelman often implored her audiences to *leave no child behind (*Dillon, 2009).

There are essentially three branches in the American education system: the K-12 system, higher education, and continuing or adult education (Sticht, 2002). As adults in general and older adults in particular make up more and more of both the population at large and the post-secondary learner population it could be that now is the time for higher and continuing education professionals to come up with their own slogan, one that indicates their dedication to support all adults who are willing, able and wanting to learn. In other words, we need to affirm our intention to *leave no adult behind*.

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