Chapter 7.1

Adult Learners, E-Learning, and Success:
Critical Issues and Challenges in an Adult Hybrid Distance Learning Program

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ABSTRACT

Adult learners have a set of specific and unique needs, and are different from traditional college students. Possessing greater maturity, interest in learning, and also career and life-oriented objectives, they have different expectations for their education, as well as different backgrounds and goals. This chapter examines what adult learners are, theories of adult learning, and the applicability of online learning to adult learners. Specific teaching methods and techniques are discussed for online and hybrid distance learning courses, as well as hybrid arrangements; encompassing teaching methods, types of exercises and activities, intensive course structures, block scheduling, and the use of modular course segments. Examples from an adult learner hybrid distance learning undergraduate program, Fairleigh Dickinson University's Global Business Management, are also provided. Future trends and areas for further research conclude the chapter.

INTRODUCTION

While the focus of undergraduate post-secondary education has for many years targeted students who have completed high school, are in their late teens and early 20's, and are obtaining a degree for their future career, adult students have gained influence and prominence in terms of their rapidly increasing numbers, and in terms of their characteristics and influence on the educational market. This emerging group of students is becoming a force, and in the

not too distant future, likely a majority, of students who enroll in educational programs. These adult students, who for various reasons did not obtain a college degree earlier in their careers and lives, are now becoming an important component of undergraduate student enrollment and recruitment and are receiving increased attention by educational institutions.

Adult learners, categorized as non-traditional students, are fundamentally different from traditional undergraduates. Their backgrounds, needs, orientation, and objectives are unique and can affect the entire realm of teaching, scheduling, student services, and use of technology in education.

The objective of this chapter is to examine the various issues, considerations, pedagogical techniques, and challenges which exist when educating adult students. Focus and attention is directed to online and e-learning, especially teaching in a hybrid distance learning environment. Insights and experiences obtained from theory, research, and practice are offered together with actual examples from a program designed to meet the unique learning needs of adults, the Global Business Management (GBM) program offered by the Silberman College of Business (SCB) at Fairleigh Dickinson University (FDU). The goal is to provide a comprehensive look at the complex set of issues and considerations which are associated with adult learner students in relation to undergraduate college studies in a hybrid distance learning setting.

CHARACTERISTICS OF ADULT LEARNERS

Adult learners comprise a significant portion of a category known as "non-traditional" undergraduate students, which now includes nearly half of all college students in the U.S (Horn, 1996). Some of the core characteristics of non-traditional students are that they delayed enrollment (did not

enter college after high school; or started and did not finish), are likely to attend school part time, have full-time jobs and careers, and are likely to be married with dependents (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002). Other related, but proportionately smaller populations may also be included in the non-traditional student category; such as older adults returning to the workforce (and college) as well as those who may have retired from a position and are seeking new careers in different areas.

In contrast to the stereotypical undergraduate student who enrolls in college as the next logical step after high school, 73% of adult non-traditional students attend college for the purposes of career advancement, to improve their knowledge in a subject area, and/or to complete a degree to add to their credentials (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). These aspects help to categorize adult learners as a specialized population, together with their educational need for current, relevant and technically oriented content, and their goals of career development and mastery of practical (and accompanying conceptual/theoretical) skills.

Many adult students are or were previously employed full-time and therefore understand that higher education is not only desirable, but necessary in today's highly competitive global economy. In fact, many jobs which will be available in the future will require higher-level cognitive skills that only a portion of current workers possess (U.S. Department of Labor, 1999). Because the global economy has placed new demands on both workers and the workplace, the goals of adult students can differ significantly from those of 18 to 21 year old students.

Adult students frequently bring to the classroom a number of positive qualities including enthusiasm and a genuine desire to learn, self-directedness, a desire to have an immediate application of learned material, a strong practical emphasis, and the ability to gain experiences related to new learning. Adult students tend to be more active in class participation, are eager

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