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Retaining mature-age students at university: A student services perspective

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Abstract: This paper presents a study of mature-age student perceptions of the university services that enhance academic outcomes and encourage retention. The study explored whether mature-age undergraduates needed, or were interested in, student services, and whether these services enhanced students' educational experience. A survey was sent to mature-age undergraduates at a U.S. public university. Respondents in this study used some student services, but found few that were helpful to them and did not perceive that many of the services were accessible to them. They further indicated that they would be interested in adult-centred services, and considered these critical to their ongoing academic success. Respondents perceived that the university did not consider them in planning programs and that their experience at the university could be enhanced by this consideration. This study documented that mature-age undergraduates have different student service needs and support a stronger emphasis on adult-focused services. Adult-centred student services can indicate to mature-age undergraduates' that their presence and participation is valued by the university, encourage community building, and increase retention. Student services are well placed within universities to facilitate and encourage this community-building in mature-age undergraduates.

Keywords: Student retention, Mature-age student, Student services

Introduction

There has been an increase in the number of mature-age students entering undergraduate study in recent years throughout the United States (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). In 2001, these adult students accounted for 31.9% of all undergraduates enrolled in public four-year degree-granting postsecondary institutions in the United States (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). Many of these adults are returning to studies that were not completed for any number of reasons, while others are beginning undergraduate study for the first time. As shifting labour force demands provide new opportunities, adults who have interrupted or postponed their tertiary education are returning to school (El-Khawas, 1996).

The appearance of these mature-age undergraduates presents new challenges to universities accustomed to serving traditional-age students. Adults entering universities are focused on non-traditional services such as childcare and re-entry skills training (Kuh & Sturgis, 1980). Because of their unique reasons for returning to education, as well as the number of competing priorities in their lives, mature-age undergraduates have specific needs and issues within the university environment that may not be met by traditional student services (Bay, 1999; Knapper & Cropley, 2000).

Non-traditional students, including mature-age undergraduates, are more likely to leave in their first year of tertiary education than traditional-age students (U.S. Department of Education, 1997; Department of Education, Science and Training, 2004). Estimates show that 60% of U.S. mature-age undergraduates leave before graduation (Wlodkowski, Maudlin &

Gahn, 2001) In 2002 in Australia, attrition rates for new undergraduate students over the age of 20 were 28.6% (Department of Education, Science and Training, 2004). Cleveland-Innes (1994) found that studying the reasons why non-traditional students persisted or withdrew from the university could allow student services staff to develop effective retention strategies. Nutter, Kroeger, and Kinnick (1991) concluded that institutions needed to provide support services that enhanced the retention of mature-age undergraduates. It will become increasingly necessary to design new programs and services as well as restructure existing ones to retain these students (Benshoff, 1991).

This study ascertained the perceptions of mature-age undergraduates regarding student services at one public university in the U.S. The study explored the student services that mature-age undergraduates' perceived were most beneficial in assisting them to be successful within the university. In addition, current student services that were available were investigated for any limitations regarding the accessibility of these services. As more adults enter undergraduate study the services offered will become critical to the ability of the university to retain these students. Knowledge of the student services perceived as necessary by mature-age undergraduates will enable student services divisions within universities to plan programs that enhance the educational experience of these students. Exploring current student services, as well as the existing literature, will assist universities in the planning of current and future student services for mature-age undergraduates.

The questions that formed the basis of this study included: (1) to what degree are mature-age undergraduates using the student services that are available? (2) what student service needs do mature-age undergraduates identify in the study? (3) to what degree does the perception of student services provided impact the success of these mature-age undergraduates.

Student involvement

The mature-age undergraduate is a unique entity that must be considered in future planning within the university. Issues of student involvement, adult student development and the impact of mature-age undergraduates on university life are critical in today's tertiary education environment. Including mature-age undergraduates as a part of the university requires a change in culture within higher education that will ultimately benefit all students (Macdonald & Stratta, 1998). An assumption made by most universities is that problems of students are specific to the role of the student and are not related to the age of the student (Holtzclaw, 1988). However, mature-age undergraduates report difficulties in integrating into college life (Bradley & Cleveland-Innes, 1992). Graham and Gisi (2000) demonstrated that engaging adults in the campus environment may be difficult due to the time restrictions on the part of the mature-age undergraduate. The multiple roles of mature-age undergraduates lead to a lack of involvement, which could negatively affect the integration of the student into the university environment.

Research on traditional-age student development links involvement in the university community to academic success (Astin, 1993; Pascarella, 1985). Astin (1993) conducted a number of studies that indicated the impact of involvement on the traditional university student. These studies showed a clear connection between the levels of involvement in the university community and opportunities for increased development as well as greater student success. Student involvement was defined as physical and psychological time that the student invests in out-of-class and in-class educational experiences (Astin, 1993). Pascarella (1985)

found that frequency and quality of student interactions with faculty both in and outside the classroom tended to be positively and significantly associated with learning.

The question remains as to whether mature-age undergraduates can benefit from involvement in the university community in the same way, and to the same level, as traditional-age students. Naretto (1995) studied community college influences on mature-age undergraduate persistence, and found evidence that adults have a strong need to be attached to the university in a psychological sense. Metzner and Bean (1987) found that research did not support the assumed theory that the external environment had more to do with adult persistence than social integration within the university. In fact, Weidman (1985) showed that integration with the university might actually have compensated for difficult external circumstances. Higher levels of engagement resulted in increased outcome scores and suggested that careful construction of involvement opportunities for mature-age undergraduates fostered additional development (Graham & Gisi, 2000). Mature-age undergraduates were open to receiving services if they were aware of the services, were offered at convenient times, and if they helped them achieve their goals (Lucas, 1994). The overall effect of involvement and interaction together with perceived support was more important than the actual time spent in activities outside of class (Graham & Gisi).

The need for the mature-age undergraduates to integrate into the university community is clear from the literature. Naretto's (1995) reported that many of the mature-age undergraduates who withdrew reported feelings of disconnectedness from university prior to withdrawal. If awareness of the needs of these students had been present, these students may have continued. Persisters spent more time on campus and integrated more closely with the university than non-persisters. Naretto suggested that a supportive university community was a critical factor in adult degree completion. Mature-age students maintain a strong sense of commitment to tertiary education (Bradley & Cleveland-Innes, 1992; Cleveland-Innes, 1994)), which can be fostered by the university. This nurturing of the mature-age undergraduate on campus can enhance the chances of these students becoming continuing contributing members of the university community. Graham and Gisi (2000) found that services including clubs and organisations, as well as meeting places specifically for mature-age undergraduates, might assist in retention.

The integration of mature-age undergraduates into the university student population is clearly different from the traditional-age student who is integrated with existing services. Adults need encouragement to engage in the college environment in ways that enhance their university experience. This leads to a need to create an environment within the university where mature-age undergraduates can integrate in meaningful ways.

Peer relationships within academic settings have been found to benefit students of all age groups (Tinto 1997a; Tinto, 1997b). Research has demonstrated (Lundberg, 2003; Wlodkowski, Maudlin, & Campbell, 2002) that social peer relationships are specifically beneficial to mature-age undergraduates. The need to belong, coupled with support through student services, was a strong incentive for an adult to attend and stay at a specific university (Schlossberg, Lynch, & Chickering, 1989). This research suggests that considering new ways to integrate mature-age undergraduates into the campus socially will encourage involvement and engender commitment on the part of the student. Student services professionals need to look for ways to remove barriers for mature-age undergraduates on campus and create an educational ethos that supports learning and caring for all students.

Methodology and outcomes

The effectiveness of student services for mature-age undergraduates was investigated using a survey designed for this study. An email with a link to the web-based survey was sent to randomly selected mature-age undergraduates enrolled at a public university in the U.S. Mature-age undergraduates are defined in the U.S. by the Department of Education as degree seeking students over the age of twenty-four. This self-reporting survey was designed to measure perceptions of the effectiveness of current student services; the adult-centred student service areas that respondents perceived would assist in their academic success, and whether these services would help retain mature-age undergraduates. Two hundred thirty-nine students (35%) of the 681 students who received surveys responded to the study.

Demographic information from each respondent was collected, including gender, age, ethnicity, and the respondent's marital status. Other demographics included pertained to the mature-age student's prior academic history, whether this was the first experience in higher education, and what motivated the student to enter study at the university. These questions were used to categorise students by response, as well as to measure the degree to which these variables influenced other aspects of the survey. It was anticipated that demographics such as gender and age would influence responses, however linear regression analysis of the demographic data collected indicated no correlation between this data and the participant responses.

The findings showed that mature-age undergraduates are aware of some, but not all, of the student services offered at their university. Mature-age undergraduates in this study did not perceive that many of the student services were accessible to them. Respondents indicated a high perceived need in the area of adult-centred student services. In the highest agreement percentages in the survey, respondents indicated an interest in services such as an mature-age student centre, first year student services for adults, and clubs and organisations designed for mature-age students.

The majority of respondents did not agree that the university considered their needs when planning services and did not perceive that their education was enhanced by student services. Respondents indicated that in most cases, their overall experience at the university would be enhanced by additional adult-centred services and that the university would be better able to retain mature-age undergraduates by implementing adult-centred student services.

Conclusion

This study documented that mature-age undergraduates have different student service needs and support a stronger emphasis on adult-focused services. The provision of student services that are designed for mature-age undergraduates is one approach to encouraging community building within this group, which can increase retention. Adult-centred student services can communicate to mature-age undergraduates' that their presence and participation is valued by the university and may increase adult enrolments. The student service division is well placed within the university to facilitate and encourage this community building in the mature-age undergraduate population. The findings have supported the previous literature and indicated that mature-age undergraduates do not perceive student services differently within their demographic sub-groups.

The absence of any adult-centred student services at the university, and the corresponding interest shown by respondents, leads to a possible recommendation that one approach to encouraging the mature-age undergraduate into the university community is through the provision of student services that are specifically designed for this group. This could serve a two-fold purpose. First, it will encourage the development of communities for mature-age undergraduates. This community development, consistently reported in the literature, is critical to the academic success of the student within the university. Second, it will illustrate to current and potential mature-age undergraduates that the university is interested in, and values, the inclusion of these students in the university community. One way that this provision of adult student services could be accomplished is through the establishment of an adult student centre within the university to coordinate and communicate adult-centred activities and opportunities.

Further research comparing differences in motivation, integration, sense of community, and perceptions of acceptance of mature-age and traditional-age undergraduates would assist in identifying how to increase retention of mature-age student. A longitudinal study of mature-age undergraduates after completion or withdrawal from universities would further allow for tracking the reasons for persistence or withdrawal. Comparative retention studies between traditional and mature-age students would assist in identifying the differences and similarities between these groups. Duplication of this study within an Australian university could form the basis of comparison between the two countries.

Consideration of the specific needs of mature-age undergraduates within the university is critical. This study documented that mature-age undergraduates have different student service needs and support a stronger emphasis on adult-focused services. The provision of student services that are designed for mature-age undergraduates is one approach to encouraging community building within this group. Adult-centred student services can communicate to mature-age undergraduates' that their presence and participation is valued by the university. Encouraging traditional and mature-age students to form collective communities would further enhance learning for each age group and would assist in communicating to mature-age undergraduates their worth within the university community. Student services divisions are well placed within the university environment to facilitate and encourage a sense of community between mature-age undergraduates and the university.

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