

Goals and objectives of successful adult degree-completion students

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ABSTRACT

In this study the researcher's intent was to examine the initial academic goals and objectives of successful adult-degree completers in four baccalaureate-degree programs at East Tennessee State University. The purpose of this study was to provide a framework for the understanding of the academic goals and objectives expressed by adult students as they were starting to return to college. Research questions that guided the study included exploration of student goals and objectives, an examination of differences among adult students' statements with regard to age, ethnicity, or gender, and an examination of differences in those statements of goals and objectives written over a range of years. Seven themes emerged among students' essays that describe those students' motivations to re-enter the university and their goals at the point of entry to those degree programs. First, students indicated they wanted to earn degrees. Second, some students identified trigger events that had prompted their return to the university. The third theme included professional goals and motivators that were included in students' statements of goals and objectives. Fourth, students cited personal motivators and goals for completing their undergraduate degrees. Fifth, students wrote about institutional barriers that led them to choose a degree-completion program over a more traditional model. Sixth, students wrote about attractive features of their respective adult-degree-completion programs. Seventh, students placed their learning in the context of a broader commitment to lifelong learning.

Keywords: Degree-Completion, Adult Students, Goal Setting, Higher Education, Lifelong Learning

INTRODUCTION

Background

The School of Continuing Studies at East Tennessee State University (ETSU) in Johnson City, TN offers four degree-completion programs for adults who are returning to school. ETSU's first adult degree-completion program, the Bachelor of General Studies (B.G.S.), began in 1989. In 2001 the school expanded its undergraduate degree program offerings to include other bachelor degrees, some of which are available entirely online. Over the preceding five years, these programs have enrolled an average of 333 students each fall and have produced an average of 124 graduates each year (ETSU, 2008). Nearly all of the students in these programs had previous college credit and were returning to school after an extended stop-out from formal undergraduate education.

Problem Statement and Research Questions

The primary intent that guided the study was to provide a framework for the understanding of the academic goals and objectives of successful adult degree-completion students. More specifically, the following questions were addressed:

1. What were the factors that drove responding adults to re-enter the university in an adult-degree-completion program?
2. What, if any, gender, age, or ethnicity differences existed among the respondents' statements of goals and objectives?
3. Were there differences in respondents' statements of goals and objectives of adult students written over a range of years?

RELATED LITERATURE

The School of Continuing Studies' adult-degree-completion students are part of a larger trend in undergraduate education. According to the Aslanian Group, in 2008 adult students accounted for approximately 35% of the undergraduate student population nationally (Aslanian & Giles, 2009). Further, traditional-age students are in many ways beginning to resemble adult students in that many are working full time, seeking alternative course delivery mechanisms, or juggling family responsibilities typically associated with adult students. Additionally, state legislatures and bureaucracies are increasingly interested in encouraging adults who have previous college credit to return to school. Many states have developed programs, such as Kentucky's Project Graduate, to eliminate barriers that adults face when making the decision to return to school and complete a degree (Sander, 2008).

In 1990, the American Council on Education (ACE) published a set of principles of good practice for degree programs designed to serve adult students. Those principles emphasized the importance of using qualitative standards in the admissions process. Such qualitative standards should help program personnel determine student motivation and develop a program plan to optimize student retention. In order to meet this standard of best practice, the School of Continuing Studies requires each student to write a statement of academic goals and objectives as part of the school's application process.

Nearly 75% of all undergraduate students have nontraditional characteristics (AASCU, 2006). Yet, whereas adult students make up a significant proportion of the undergraduate student population, higher education literature often ignores this population. A 2007 content analysis of higher education literature revealed that fewer than 2% of all articles in higher education journals identified adult students as the subjects of their studies. Adults were mentioned more frequently in community college journals than in journals focused on baccalaureate students. In addition to being almost invisible within the higher education literature, many articles devalued adult contributions to colleges and universities (Donaldson & Townsend, 2007). Existing adult education literature is overrun with studies describing adult motivation to return to education.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Population

During the academic years 1999/2000 through 2007/2008, the four degree-completion programs at East Tennessee State University have produced 1,018 graduates. This study examined the essays of 637 graduates of these four programs, 63.0% of all graduates in the program. The excluded essays were from graduates who either did not submit essays as part of the admissions process or whose essays had been lost from the graduates' files.

For the population selected the mean age of the students at the time of graduation was 33. The median age of students in the population was 30. The ages of students in the population covered a 50-year span; ranging in age from 21 to 71. Male students comprised 44.0% of the selected population and 56.0% of students in the population were female. Students of color comprised 7.0% of the selected population and 93.0% of students were Caucasian.

Data Collection and Analysis

Student statements of academic goals and objectives for graduates of the B.G.S. and other bachelor degree programs were transcribed and collected in an excel spreadsheet. The documents collected included essays from graduates from the B.G.S. program from 1998 to 2008. Essays from the other bachelor degree graduates were collected from the files of students who graduated between 2001 and 2008. The other bachelor degree programs did not begin until 2001; therefore, there were no graduates from these three programs before 2001.

The data were coded using the constant-comparative method developed by Strauss and Corbin (1990). This open-coding process requires the researcher to examine and subdivide data for the purpose of categorization. By organizing and arranging such data according to interactions between categories the researcher is involved in the process of axial coding. A peer coder was also used to ensure the accuracy of the findings. An initial set of codes was developed using ideas that emerged from an evaluation of the literature. A set of 20 essays was coded. Then, the peer coder, Dr. Rick Osborn, currently Dean of the School of Continuing Studies and Academic Outreach at ETSU and immediate past president of the Association of Continuing Higher Education, evaluated the coding of the same set of essays. The open-coding structures were compared with the peer coder's categories. This comparison continued until there was assurance that the coding process did not omit or misrepresent student essay content.

Open coding involved breaking down the essays into individual elements that characterized the ideas being presented. The five codes that were assigned to this essay were

“associate degree,” “earn a degree,” “military experience,” “time to graduation,” and “multiple institutions.” Up to eight codes were assigned to each essay. Axial coding involved interpreting and organizing the many codes that emerged from essays during the open coding process and then organizing these codes into broader categories.

Analysis of the data made use of three kinds of triangulation. First, because the data were collected from graduates over a period of 10 years, the analysis made use of data source triangulation. Secondly, because the study included analysis by a peer coder, the data were triangulated by using an additional investigator. Finally, because data were interpreted from different viewpoints, the analysis included theory triangulation. These protocols, as part of the research design produced additional interpretations and confirmed meanings emerging from the analysis of the data set (Stake, 1995).

FINDINGS AND INTERPRETATION

Research Question 1: What were the factors that drove respondents to re-enter the university in an adult-degree-completion program?

In order to answer this question, all 637 admissions essays were examined using the open and axial coding process described above. Seven major themes emerged from the analysis of these essays. They were, in order of frequency, as follows:

1. The desire to earn a degree;
2. Trigger events that prompted a return to the university;
3. Professional factors that were goals and motivators for students;
4. Personal factors that were goals and motivators for students;
5. Institutional factors that inhibited success in more traditional programs; and
6. Program features of adult-degree-completion programs that students found attractive.

The six factors presented above represent the broad themes that permeated students' statements of academic goals and objectives. The desire to earn a degree was the most prominent theme of students' essays. Some students' essays described trigger events that prompted a return to school. Other students' essays contained detailed personal or professional elements that influenced their choice to participate in an adult-degree completion program. Many students pointed to institutional factors that may have kept them from pursuing traditional degrees. In response to these institutional barriers, some students pointed to the distinct features of the bachelor degree programs that helped resolve the barriers of a traditional program and responded to their needs as adult learners. Finally, many students indicated that earning an undergraduate degree was part of a larger commitment to lifelong learning.

Research Question 2: What if any gender, age, or ethnicity differences existed among the respondents' statements of goals and objectives?

Gender

There appeared to be very few differences between males and females in terms of the information they included in their statements of academic goals and objectives. There are only two areas where there were substantial differences in frequency between males and females. First, females reported much more frequently that their parental responsibilities were among the

reasons they were seeking degree-completion programs over traditional programs. Nearly 17% of females, compared to 5% of males, mentioned their parenting responsibilities in their essays. Second, more men than women indicated they either had military experience or planned to pursue military careers after graduation. Seven percent of the men reported that they either had military experience or aspired to military careers, whereas fewer than 1% of women mentioned the military in their essays.

Age

Although there were few differences regarding age in the findings of this study, some age-specific findings did emerge. Several findings emerged related to students who were over 55. First, only students who were over 55 listed retirement as a reason for returning to school to finish a degree. Second, students over 55 were more likely to indicate they had some regret about their choices when they initially enrolled in college. Finally, students who indicated they had experienced or were experiencing medical difficulties were either over 55 or in the 40-44 year old age group.

Other findings emerged for students in the 45-and-over categories. First, only students who were over 45 mentioned in their essays that they had children who were in college. Students 45 to 49 most often indicated that they had military experience. Third, students from 45 to 54 frequently said they hoped to “finish what they had started,” by persisting to a degree. Fourth, students who were 45 to 49 more often indicated they wanted to earn more money. Fifth, students 50 to 54 most frequently indicated that they hoped to improve their work skills.

Another set of findings related to students who were 30 and over. First, only female students between the ages of 35 and 44 indicated that they were widowed. Second, only students between the ages of 30 and 39 indicated that they were single parents. Third, only students between the ages of 30 and 49 indicated that they believed learning was fun, and this attribute most often was mentioned by students between the ages of 45 and 49. Fourth, students between the ages of 30 and 44 often said they had parental responsibilities. Fifth, students 30 to 39 frequently wrote about the advantages of online courses. Sixth, students over 35 most often reported they had earned associate’s degrees.

Only students under 39 indicated they were concerned about the costs of college. And students under 24 also most often pointed to the ability to tailor their coursework as an attractive feature of degree-completion programs.

Ethnicity

As with gender, there were few differences in the information students of color revealed in their essays when compared with white students. Students of color reported more concern with their grade-point-averages than did white students. Only about 2% of white students mentioned GPAs in their essays, compared with nearly 15% of students of color. Students of color also indicated they wanted to earn degrees much more often than did white students. Thirty-one percent of white students indicated they wanted to earn degrees compared with nearly 42% of students of color. In addition, 80.0% of all students who indicated they were involved with athletics were students of color. Nearly 10% of students of color were current or former student-athletes, compared with fewer than 1% of white students. Further, nearly 9% of students

of color reported having transfer difficulties at ETSU, whereas only 1% of white students mentioned transfer difficulties in their essays.

Research Question 3: Were there differences in respondents' statements of goals and objectives of adult students written over a range of years?

In order to address this question, the frequency counts of individual codes in each year studied were examined. Most findings were consistent over time; however, a few patterns emerged over time. The first set of findings was related to students' financial and professional lives. First, the number of students reporting that they had been laid off from a job peaked at 3.9% in 2006. Students expressed the strongest desire to increase their financial status in 2007 when 5.4% of student listed goals that included earning more money. Related to earning more money, more students wrote about a desire to earn a promotion or further their careers in 2006 than in any other year. In 2006 nearly 27% of students included career advancement as part of their statements of academic goals and objectives. Concerns about college costs did not appear in essays written before 2000. This concern for the financial strain of attending college peaked at 7.3% in 2003.

The second set of findings concern program features. Students mentioned the attractiveness of flexible scheduling more before 2001. In 1998 and 1999, nearly 21% of students mentioned flexible scheduling, 14.3% listed flexible scheduling as an attractive feature in 1999. After 2001, the flexible scheduling aspect of the program appears in less than 8% of students' essays. Mentions of the online advantage in students' essays begins and peaks in 2001(14.6%) and tapers off slightly after the 2001 year. In 2004 and 2005 the ability to tailor coursework within the programs emerged as a theme in students' essay. In 2004 nearly 22% of students wrote about tailoring coursework to fit their needs. And nearly 23% wrote about tailored coursework in 2005.

CONCLUSION

Cross (1981) wrote, "...the ultimate goal of lifelong education is to maintain and improve the quality of life" (p. 263). For many of the students in this study earning a baccalaureate degree was a means to an end. For some students earning a degree was a path to better career opportunities, and for others earning a degree was part of a journey toward self-acceptance and personal fulfillment. Regardless of the barriers those students were facing the impending obstacles to create better lives for themselves, their communities, or their families. Those nontraditional students came into adult-degree-completion programs with responsibilities and experiences that traditional students often lacked. Higher education professionals and continuing educators should take steps to validate each adult's unique experience and to help eliminate barriers in order to optimize hope within each student and propel him or her toward success.

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