

# My Unexpected Learning about Adult Learners: Engaging Adult Learners through Intentional Advocacy

*Jason L. Meriwether shares how his first experience having an adult student in his classroom helped him recognize both the benefits she brought to the class as well as the unique needs of adult learners in general.*

**By Jason L. Meriwether**

**W**ITH FONDNESS, I CAN CLEARLY RECALL the moment when an adult student named Mary walked into my classroom. In my late 20s at the time, I was an adjunct professor of psychology teaching a course with just over 20 students, mostly around the age of 19, who were enrolled as a requirement for their major. Mary, who was taking the course as an elective, was in her 40s and pursuing her first degree as well. Mary entered the classroom and paused before selecting her seat, which was near the front but slightly away from the other chattering students.

Not so fondly, I recall feeling reticent about how well I could make the course material relevant for Mary, and realized that for the first time, I was younger than one of my students. During my prior two years teaching psychology, the class had included only traditional students. I was well versed in the course material, and understood modalities for the students I was accustomed to, both of which gave me a great level of comfort as an instructor. As Mary was my first adult

learner, I faced much uncertainty about how I could ensure that she was adequately engaged while making certain that classroom discussions felt authentic as they had in previous courses. In spite of my command of the subject matter, this was the first time I truly felt unprepared.

I know I'm not alone in this experience. Educators are seeing increasingly more adult learners entering higher education institutions and these learners require strategic focus and attention. But the payoff is worth it: they can offer unique perspectives to any class as they bring in their own knowledge, expertise, and lived experience. This perspective adds dimension to the classroom, and it is important that we intentionally engage and create an inclusionary environment for these students, as their added diversity in the classroom enhances everyone's experience and benefits not just each individual class, but the entire university. I was soon to learn this, and that having Mary in my class was a gift.

## Who Exactly Are Adult Learners?

**TYPICALLY DEFINED AS COLLEGE STUDENTS** over the age of 25, the American Council on Education notes "...for almost two decades, adult learners have comprised close to 40 percent of the college-going population." Their experiences and motivations for enrolling in college are unique. Some adults may be in their 20s, having spent time working before enrolling in college, while others may be parents who are managing a family while pursuing a degree for the first time. Others however, seek an additional degree on a part-time basis while juggling family and career, which dictates a very different timeline for completion than most traditional students. A number of adults enroll to take an employer-funded series of classes or complete a certificate to earn an increase in pay. Yet another segment includes veterans who have returned from active duty and work toward a degree while mitigating the challenges associated with re-acclimation to civilian life.

In fact, over the next decade, the adult college population is predicted to increase based on the trending decline of high school populations. In a 2013 National Center for Education Statistics study conducted by William Hussar and Tabitha Bailey, research outcomes project a 2 percent decrease in overall high school graduates by 2022–2023. The same study also projects that while there will be a 9 percent increase in 18–24-year-olds attending college, it will be outpaced by an increase of 20 percent among 25–34-year-old adults and a 23 percent increase in

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adults over 35 years during the same time period. This pending growth demonstrates the impact that adults will have on college campuses.

Competition and distance learning have saturated the market and created many options for adult learners. A 2010 study by Kai Drekmeier and Christopher Tilghman examines the factors that influence adult students' decision to enroll in college, noting that almost one in five prospective students planned to enroll in one university, but chose to attend a competitor. These choices were based on factors such as "how appropriate the university is for this particular student," or if academic programs are offered in a way that "fits with the adult student lifestyle." Competitors with an easier admission process, more obvious adult services, or more choices for taking classes often had an advantage.

The examples above are just a few of the many factors that impact how adults choose colleges, persist after enrollment, or decide to leave. Based on the varying motivation for adults, it is especially important for staff, administrators, and faculty to enhance skills, refine pedagogy, assess effectiveness, and stay connected to best practices regarding adult learners. Just as African American, Latino, LGBT, or other student populations cannot simply be treated as a homogenous demographic group, adult learners require similar strategic focus and

attention from campus leadership.

## Adult Learning Theory in Action

**TO MANAGE MY FEARS ABOUT** teaching adult students, I sought out theoretical concepts to boost my knowledge and guide my preparation for teaching classes with adults in order to be a teacher those students could find engaging. Jack Mezirow, an Emeritus Professor of Adult and Continuing Education at Columbia University, is still among my favorite adult education resources. In the 1990 book *Fostering Critical Reflection in Adulthood: A Guide to Transformative and Emancipatory Learning*, Mezirow identified transformational learning as the process through which adults' experience structures are challenged and learning occurs.

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I began to apply this model by empowering shared perspectives during in-class discussions. This worked when we explored theories that were new to some of my traditional students and Mary began to freely offer practical experiences as a professional and as a parent that made the concepts tangible for other students. However, it is important not to burden adult learners with the expectation to discuss their personal and family stories or to assume that this is the only perspective they can offer, while also setting general boundaries for all students to share stories.

Adapting my teaching strategy to engage my adult learners benefited the entire class. I observed a shift in the behavior of some traditional students during group projects or discussions as they began to seek out Mary's perspective on how to make concepts more realistic. They began to frequently invite her to join their small groups. Several of the students became more open to hearing other points of view because they valued Mary's insight, which exceeded their level of experience. As an example, we had a class discussion about stereotypes that exist based on physical appearance. Two students who questioned the validity of this stereotyping and whether it actually happens in the workplace interrupted the conversation to ask Mary for her thoughts. After hearing from her, the two students were willing to accept that negative consequences associated with stereotyping could in fact be prevalent outside of social circles, which was something they hadn't before considered.

One evening, Mary waited for me after class to tell me how much she enjoyed feeling valued for her point of view in comparison to other classes where she was reticent to speak out during discussions. She explained that students in my course were not treating her like "the old lady in the class," noting that she actually felt "normal" during in-class discussions. It became evident that while Mary sought to be assimilated into the normalcy of the classroom dynamic, she valued the chance to speak from her life experience. I realized the important balance between intentionally engaging my adult learner without burdening her to carry the banner for every adult student in the world.

## The Importance of Articulating Learning Outcomes

**FOR MY COURSE, I DESIGNED** learning outcomes to reflect not only an understanding of the material and application of critical thinking, but also understanding of varying points of view. David Kolb, Professor of Organizational Behavior at Case Western Reserve University and author of *Experiential Learning*, discusses several goals for adult learning that center on experience-based learning. I applied Kolb's work by encouraging adult learners to share personally significant ideas and offer their experiences during class discussions. My class evaluations consistently demonstrated that adult learners rated my style of group

engagement highest among elements of the course design, while traditional students also noted how valuable having an adult in their class or group was to the experience.

Another important technique that helps non-traditional learners feel engagement and belonging is experienced-based learning. In classroom group assignments, for example, it is important to address a smaller number of adult learners by spreading them out in some cases, while in other learning situations, allowing adults to join other groups, or perhaps decide to engage each other to discuss shared experiences. This is not as regimented as assigning one adult per group or

lumping all adults together; however, it is important to make sure that the students are given opportunities to interact with each other in many different scenarios.

Based on the varying motivation for adults, it is especially important for staff, administrators, and faculty to enhance skills, refine pedagogy, assess effectiveness, and stay connected to best practices regarding adult learners.

## The Importance of Openly Welcoming, Recognizing, and Investing in Individual Students

**AT MY INSTITUTION,** Indiana University Southeast, 36 percent of our new students are over 25 years at the time of entry, which stretches to a number of students who are above 60 years. Since enrolling and maintaining this type of student is part of our strategy, IU

Southeast has adjusted our service units to meet this sizable adult population's needs.

For example, The Indiana University Southeast Adult Student Center remains open 24 hours a day. The center is open to students by providing computer access and other reference materials even during hours when staff may not be physically present. Kim Pelle, the Adult Student Center Director at Indiana University Southeast, explains that adults also “enjoy having a place of their own where they have peers with whom they can share the experience.” Pelle notes that when adult learners are struggling in classes, they can find mentors, tutors, and a support system for each other through the Adult Center and that “the commonality of their life situations makes them feel not alone.”

These types of interactions are not uncommon. For instance, Pelle describes the experience of Alyssa, a student and mother of three children, who sometimes comes to the Center to study and who benefits from the camaraderie that makes it easier to mitigate life's challenges and stay in college. One day, Alyssa was sharing her struggle of trying to balance her children and classes, and how it was especially difficult because some professors did not allow children in evening classes. Another adult student who had four children of her own commiserated with Alyssa, and the two eventually pooled services for childcare. They also became study partners, a relationship that lasted through graduation.

For any type of institution, a childcare center can make a huge difference for adult learners with children. As Elisa Garcia, Office and Program Coordinator with the Institute for Women's Policy Research, noted in 2011, “By not supporting student parents with accessible and affordable child care, colleges and universities are denying a significant fraction of their community a chance to earn an advanced degree and obtain the types of jobs afforded to other undergraduates.” Offering this service on our campus provides a convenient and affordable resource for our sizable adult population, which is preferential to mitigating challenges of bringing children to class, balancing rules or safety concerns for certain classroom or labs, or juggling arrangements for kids between work and school.

Terry, a 27-year-old adult learner on my campus is a veteran and a full-time student; he works part time and is not a parent. He shared that he decided to transfer to our school because he never felt his

previous campus offered anything “meant for adults” and had very few night and weekend classes. Terry also explained that he and his friends believed that everything at the institution was “just for an 18-year-old.”

His perspective reinforces the importance of intentionally recognizing adults even if there are only a few enrolled at the institution. When university strategies are exclusively directed toward recruiting high-school students, course offerings are not flexible for nights or weekends, and digital or online presence only exhibits campus life from the perspective of traditional undergraduates, adult learners may not feel embraced or welcomed.

Examining the various demographics of adults who have left the institution beyond conventional factors such as race, gender, or finance provides an opportunity to identify common factors that may influence student departure. The Drekmeier and Tilghman study demonstrated that “almost 30 percent of adult stu-

dents have difficulty integrating school with their other commitments, and continuing their education suffers.” For example, commonalities among departed adults based on age, socioeconomic status, family, affordability, lack of access to needed assistance, or work stressors may provide the information needed to trigger service refinement.

Proactively designing services to engage adult learners and offering front-end and ongoing faculty partnerships will yield the strongest resources for adult learners. At my institution, we are initiating a new adult student centered first-year seminar course this fall along with orientations specifically for adult students. This new course is a result of collaboration between our faculty director of the first-year program, academic advising, and our orientation office; this partnership will also support the new orientation structure, making it more effective than being solely managed by the orientation office.

Equally important is both recognizing and honoring these students for their achievements. One of the most personally rewarding experiences I have had with adult learners was attending my first Pinnacle Honor Society induction in April of 2014. Pinnacle, a national organization founded in 1989, offers a special honorary society for adult and nontraditional students. During our university's ceremony, I had the opportunity to meet Alfred, who told me about his experience as a student in his 60s. Most poignant among Alfred's comments was his expression of being humbled that he

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was at a university where people valued his life experience and his service to several community organizations, all while taking a full load of courses.

As campuses seek meaningful ways to recognize and engage their adult learners, chartering a Pinnacle Honor Society or developing another system of public recognition sends a deliberate message. Although adult learners desire adequate services, creating a place within the university community to receive, engage, and honor adult and nontraditional learners, stands as a visible symbol of embracing this population.

## Working Toward the Outcomes We Seek

**CAMPUS LEADERS SEEKING TO INCREASE** their adult populations can best serve their campuses by evaluating institutional culture and capacity to offer a range of services for adult learners.

Those universities that have established robust infrastructure for online learning may employ specific strategies to offer distance and hybrid courses to meet working adult schedules and provide opportunity for accelerated program completion. Institutions that have traditionally relied on commuter students to build enrollment may already have numerous student support services that could be expanded to meet adult student needs. Other universities who wish to effectively serve adults can benefit from collecting data about adults in their service areas, evaluating services, or engaging faculty about adult-focused academic programs.

Campus communities can also benefit from supporting other members of the institution who are unfamiliar with adult learners. Faculty with research interests in pedagogy or instruction for adults, faculty who have expertise and experience with adult student populations or who express interest and willingness to actively engage adult learning, should be included in strategy building. Of course, advocates cannot assume that all faculty members are familiar with every aspect of the adult student experience and therefore should generate data to inform academic leaders about specific needs identified through the lens of an adult

student. Ultimately, data, flexibility, and collaboration must be at the nexus of evaluating and adapting services to meet adult student needs.

## The Importance of Mary

**AFTER MY CLASS ENDED FOR** the semester, Mary shared with me that her initial thought that first day in my class was “What can this young guy teach me?” In a moment of confession, I admitted to her that I wondered to myself, “How in the world am I going to teach her?” Over a hearty laugh, we both shared how positively this moment had influenced us. During our talk, Mary explained that she never knew how she had impacted me, and was glad to learn that she influenced my teaching style. Since then, I have remained in contact with Mary, celebrating good news about her family and career.

While my relationship with Mary reminded me of the importance of adapting teaching modalities, more importantly, it reminded me that connecting with her and showing her that I cared mattered the most. It is important for us to remember that Mary and other adult learners bring something unique and invaluable to the classroom experience and therefore the university as a whole, so we must support them. We must take advantage of every opportunity to review, restructure, and

refine our methods to adequately support the adult student population.

As we begin or continue our journeys as advocates for adult learning, we can make the most impact when we remember that as much as adult students want our quality and academic reputation when they select a university, they too want to feel included, connected, valued, and empowered to succeed. And as advocates of *all* learners, we must strive to do this.

## NOTES

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