

RETENTION AND PERSISTENCE IN UNIVERSITY CONTINUING EDUCATION PROGRAMS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA—A CASE STUDY¹

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Abstract

This case study of university continuing education (UCE) students at the University of Manitoba (UM) explored the retention and persistence of adult learners in non-credit certificate programs. Data from telephone interviews of those who had not taken a course in the past two years were used. The purposes of the study were to understand why adult learners participate in and drop out from UCE non-credit certificates; understand their goals, intentions, barriers to participation, and retention; and identify effective recruitment and retention strategies. The findings suggest that understanding the nature of these adult learners is critical for retention and persistence; that they have dependent children and are highly motivated and goal-oriented; and that they work full time and “stop out” from their programs because of work–life balance issues, including situational, dispositional, institutional, and systemic barriers. Further, understanding the nature of their classroom experience is critical for retention and persistence, institutional sustainability, and program improvements.

Résumé

Cette étude de cas par des étudiants en formation continue universitaire (UCE) de l'Université du Manitoba (UM) a exploré la rétention et la persistance de apprenants adultes dans les programmes de certificat non-crédités. Les données provenant d'entrevues téléphoniques de ceux n'ayant pas suivi de cours dans les deux dernières années ont été utilisées. Les buts de l'étude étaient de comprendre pourquoi les apprenants adultes participent et abandonnent les programmes de certificat non-crédités UCE; de comprendre leurs objectifs, leurs intentions, les

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obstacles à la participation et la rétention; ainsi que d'identifier des méthodes de recrutement et des stratégies de rétention efficaces. Les résultats suggèrent que la compréhension de la nature de ces apprenants adultes est cruciale à la rétention et à la persistance; qu'ils ont des enfants à charge et sont très motivés et orientés vers la rencontre de leurs buts, et qu'ils travaillent à plein temps et « raccrochent » de leurs programmes en raison de problèmes de conciliation de l'équilibre travail-famille, y compris les barrières situationnelles, institutionnelles, systémiques et de disposition. De plus, la compréhension de la nature de leur expérience en classe est essentielle à la rétention et à la persistance, à la durabilité institutionnelle, et l'amélioration du programme.

Introduction

Over a five-year period, University of Manitoba Continuing Education (UMCE) experienced a steady departure of adult students in its non-credit certificate programs; between 2003–2004 and 2008–2009, there was an 8% decline in enrollment (University of Manitoba, 2009). UMCE is a cost-recovery unit; therefore, declining enrollment reduces revenues and threatens sustainability. Understanding why UMCE's adult learners drop out and/or do not continue their programs of study is critical to increasing their retention and persistence. It also has implications for improving the research literature on factors that contribute to and/or hinder the success of adult learners in university continuing education (UCE) as well as implications for institutional success and viability.

While there is extensive research on student retention and barriers to participation in higher degree credit programs (Tinto, 2006–2007), little of this kind of research focuses on UCE non-credit certificate programs. In addition, Tinto's model, which is the foundational work on student retention in higher education, focuses on individual characteristics, institutional factors, and academic and social integration, but is almost silent on the classroom as the site that inhibits and/or enhances students' retention and persistence (Ashar & Skenes, 1993; Braxton, Milem, & Shaw Sullivan, 2000).

This study explored retention and persistence of adult learners who registered in UMCE non-credit certificate programs, were normally employed full time, and studied part time. Those who had not taken a course in the past two years, had not graduated, and had time left to complete their program were contacted for telephone interviews. The goal of the research was to help adult educators, practitioners, and researchers understand retention and persistence in UCE non-credit certificate programs. The purposes of this study were to understand their educational experiences and why they participated in or dropped out from their programs; understand their goals, intentions, barriers to participation, and retention; and identify effective recruitment and retention strategies. The paper is organized in six sections: introduction, background, literature review, methodology, findings, and discussion and conclusions.

Background

UMCE is recognized as one of Manitoba's largest providers of non-credit programs, offering over 25 theoretical and practical non-credit certificate programs ranging from adult education to applied counselling to an extensive range of management programs that reflect current issues in the workplace and communities. UMCE's goal is to provide adult learners with lifelong learning for professional, personal, and community development to advance in their careers and enrich their personal lives (Sloane-Seale, 2008).

Among UMCE's largest non-credit certificate programs are the Canadian Institute of Management Certificate in Management and Administration (CIM), which is a nationally recognized management program for supervisors, managers, and administrators in the public or private sector who wish to develop their managerial knowledge and skills; the Human Resource Management (HRM) certificate, which provides leadership, teamwork, communication, and strategic planning knowledge and skills for human resource practitioners; the Certificate in Adult and Continuing Education (CACE) for instructors, trainers, staff developers, instructional designers, facilitators, and literacy and second-language specialists in the private or public sector who are responsible for helping adults learn; the Applied Counselling Certificate (ACC) for professionals and paraprofessionals involved in direct counselling through paid or volunteer work; the Certificate in Applied Management (CAM), which allows individuals in various work environments to combine management studies with specializations appropriate to their own professional development interests; the General Case Management certificate (CMC), which prepares those in medical, social, and physical services, claims management, and long-term care facilities to move beyond entry-level case management positions or enter a second career; and the Financial Management Accounting certificate (FMA), which provides comprehensive coverage of financial and management accounting topics for individuals aspiring to enter or advance their careers in the field of accounting.

All programs emphasize application of theory and knowledge into skilled practice. They offer a range of delivery methods, including mostly face to face, some distance, and a limited number of blended and online formats. Programs normally consist of approximately 180 to 400 instructional contact hours of required and elective courses that are normally completed in three or four years of evening part-time study. Students are allowed six or eight years to complete a three- or four-year program. Evaluation is based on the UM letter-grade system. The departure rate (8% over the past five years) is a vexing retention and persistence problem.

Literature Review

Tinto's (1975, 2005) student integration model, which over the past four decades has formed the basis of research and theory on student retention and persistence in higher education, incorporates 1) pre-entry characteristics such as family background, skills and abilities, and high-school grades; 2) initial career goals and commitment upon entry into university; 3) institutional experiences with both the academic system (e.g., formal academic performance and informal interactions with faculty/staff) and the social system (e.g., engagement with formal extracurricular activities and informal engagement with

peer groups); 4) personal/normative integration (i.e., academic and social integration in the life of the institution); 5) emergent career goals and institutional commitment over the academic year; and 6) final commitment (i.e., to remain or leave the institution).

The model outlines the process of student integration and institutional commitment. On enrollment, these background factors and initial commitment to the institution are subsequently modified by the extent to which the student becomes socially integrated into campus communities. This integration impacts the student's overall level of commitment to the institution (Tinto, 1997). However, empirical and conceptual testing identifies support of only 5 of the 13 primary propositions in Tinto's 1975 foundational theory. For instance, the concept of social integration is problematic. Student entry characteristics (i.e., family background, socioeconomic status, and parental educational level), individual attributes (i.e., academic ability, race, and gender), and pre-college experience (i.e., high-school academic accomplishments) affect the level of initial commitment to the institution. The initial level of commitment impacts the subsequent level of institutional commitment, and the subsequent level of institutional commitment is positively influenced by the extent of a student's integration into the social communities of the university. The greater the level of subsequent commitment to the institution, there is a higher likelihood of the student's persistence and retention. These empirically supported propositions leave social integration unexplained (Braxton et al., 2000).

Tinto (1997) agrees that if social integration is to happen it must begin in the classroom, because the classroom is the gateway for student involvement in the academic and social communities of the university. Thus, he acknowledges that the classroom is one source of influence on social integration, subsequent institutional commitment, and retention. Scholars have begun to examine the role of classroom academic experiences in retention (Braxton et al., 2000), the relationship of social integration (sense of belonging) and discussion of content with other students outside the classroom (Hurtado & Carter, 1997, as cited in Braxton et al., 2000), and the role of cooperative learning in retention (Tinto, 1997).

Tinto's formulations focus on traditional students—that is, full-time two- and/or four-year college degree students; dropouts defined as academic failures as opposed to voluntary withdrawals; residential students; and/or white, middle-class adults 18 to 24 years old (Tinto, 2006–2007). As a result, there may be limited value in understanding motivation, barriers, and dropout behaviours of adult learners (25 or older) in UCE non-credit certificate programs (McGivney, 2004; O'Toole, Stratton, & Wetzel, 2003) who attend part time, work full time, and have family and community commitments and responsibilities. Nevertheless, while Tinto's body of research emphasizes factors that may not resonate for adult learners in UCE programs, the strengths of these formulations have led to understanding the complex web of factors that shape student leaving and persistence. Therefore, they provide a basis for research concerning adult learners in UCE non-credit certificate programs, their classroom and institutional experiences, their reasons for leaving or staying in their programs (Long, 1992; Thompson, 2005), and barriers to participation. The purpose of this exploratory research is to describe not only individual characteristics and institutional experiences (Tinto, 2003) but also the classroom as a possible site of academic and social integration of adult learners who participate part time in UCE non-

credit certificate programs, their intentions and reasons for participating and dropping out, and barriers to program completion.

In Tinto's model, concepts of academic integration (e.g., attending classes and non-required academic activities) and social integration (e.g., participating in extracurricular activities and making friends) are central. However, for UCE students attending commuter campuses, academic engagement and achievement may be more critical than academic integration and social involvement because these adult learners have adult roles and family responsibilities that may fully engage and commit them outside the institution. Tinto (1993) also found too much social engagement may negate academic integration. Further, factors external to the institution, such as family responsibilities, non-supportive family, and finances, may negatively impact both traditional (Bean, 1990; Grayson, 1997) and UCE students' retention. While income matters (e.g., high-income students outperform low-income students on completion and retention rates), students' persistence and success remain reflections of not only institutional practice and action (Tinto & Pusser, 2006) but also classroom experiences, especially for UCE adult learners who are often financially supported by their employers.

For non-traditional adult learners who attend UCE non-credit certificate programs on a part-time basis, have adult roles and family responsibilities, have full-time jobs and financial supports from employers, and are involved in their communities, academic engagement (active learning practices; i.e., activities that involve students in doing and thinking) with instructors and peers in the classroom rather than social integration in the life of the institution may positively impact student integration, contributing to student persistence (Ashar & Skenes, 1993; Braxton et al., 2000). Finally, the model assumes that an emergent career goal is critical to persistence; however, many adult students have full-time careers (Kerka, 1995) and have returned part time for work-related goals such as to improve their skills, knowledge, and abilities. While the model suggests that background characteristics and initial goals and commitments influence retention decisions, for UCE non-credit certificate adult students who have full-time careers, specific career and educational goals, commitments, and employer supports, the tipping point in their departure decision may include not only effective recruitment and retention strategies and perceptions of classroom and institutional experiences, but also motivations and barriers to participation.

Motivations and Barriers to Participation

To understand participation and deterrent factors, an examination of the multidimensional concept of barriers (Scanlan, 1986; Valentine & Darkenwald, 1990) and their interactions, and how these affect participation and persistence, is required. While Houle's (1961) three-way typology (expanded by Boshier, 1971; Rubenson, 1977) of goal, activity, and knowledge reasons for participating in educational activities is instructive, Cross's (1981) framework of participation is a more comprehensive tool for understanding the broader concept of participation, and draws on both achievement and attribution theories of motivation to explain the decision to participate (Pintrich & Schunk, 1996; Svinicki, 2000). Cross categorizes barriers as dispositional, situational, or institutional. Dispositional barriers include expectations, self-esteem, level of family support, and past

educational experiences (Hubble, 2000). Situational factors incorporate financial resources and job, legal, personal, and family circumstances (Belzer, 1998; Cantor, 1992; Cranton, 1992). Institutional factors address access to information, costs of programs, bureaucracy, scheduling, and procedures.

From this standpoint, adult learners' motivations are crucial, both influencing their participation and affecting how their behaviour is interpreted. Adult learners who drop out may be stopping out; i.e., interrupting their studies but planning to return (Frank & Gaye, 1997, as cited in Wonacott, 2001) and/or opting out because they have achieved their goals without needing to complete the entire program. Therefore, a broader definition of retention and persistence for UCE adult learners may include what Comings, Parrella, and Soricone (1999) describe as interrupted educational studies along with episodes of program participation if they are both aspects of adult learners' comprehensive learning strategy.

Moreover, many studies take a psychological approach, finding that students must experience attitudinal changes to succeed (Beder, 1991; Courtney, 1992; Cross, 1981). Cross's framework does not address cultural and systemic issues such as sexism, ageism, and the politics of education, yet these may constitute major barriers to adult learners (McCann, 1995). Other studies offer a sociological approach that requires structural change and community-based empowerment (Beder; Cervero & Kirkpatrick, 1990; Man, 2004; Quigley, 1990) and suggest psychological and sociological approaches as retention and recruitment strategies.

Retention and Recruitment Strategies

In the higher-education literature, student departure is seen to take many forms and arises from the individual and the institution. Reasons for leaving include academic difficulty, inability to adjust to college life, lack of clear goals and commitment to program completion, insufficient funds, lack of academic and social integration into college life, incongruence with the institution, and isolation or lack of interaction with other students and/or faculty (Tinto, 2003). Conklin (1993) suggests that satisfaction with college also relates to quality of instruction, attention from faculty, class scheduling, the registration process, the variety of courses, career/transfer preparation, job placement services, and availability of scholarships and financial aid. While some of these factors may apply to all students, including UCE adult learners, they suggest a psychological approach to retention and recruitment that may be only one view of reality.

Some higher-education studies recognize that a growing number of adult learners are non-traditional learners who juggle multiple roles (i.e., work, education, family, and community) and face a number of barriers (e.g., situational, dispositional, and institutional) that have implications for retention (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002; Fairchild, 2003). Fairchild proposes a systemic approach to retention that includes more services, supports, and flexibility (e.g., a one-stop shop; web-based services; adequate convenient parking; an orientation program; low-cost, on-campus child care; family oriented events; prior learning recognition; and extended hours). Building learning communities is also seen to increase recruitment and retention, especially if they incorporate effective orientation

programs and professional supports such as preceptors, mentors, coaches, and peers (Bassi & Polifroni, 2005). These supports increase self-confidence and communication skills, prevent isolation, solve problems, increase professional growth, foster mutual respect and connections, and may resonate with UCE adult learners.

Tinto's (2003) more recent three-pronged approach to retention, in which successful retention is viewed as successful education, may also be relevant to UCE adult learners and consistent with the andragogical assumptions of adult education that underlie UCE. This approach suggests institutional commitment to students (i.e., a student-centred institution with an ethos of caring that permeates the life of the institution); educational commitment (i.e., social and intellectual growth and education of students); and social and intellectual community (i.e., inclusive learning communities with quality interaction with faculty, staff, and other students).

Research Gaps

This literature review has shown that the issues affecting UCE students have not been adequately addressed. Unlike traditional degree-credit higher-education students, UCE non-credit certificate students are older, attend part time, work full time, have career-related goals and commitment upon initial admission, and have family and community commitments and responsibilities. Academic engagement and achievement in inclusive student-centred learning classrooms rather than academic integration and social involvement in the life of the institution may be more important to their persistence and retention as are their motivations and barriers to participation. Understanding why adult learners in UCE non-credit certificate programs do not complete their programs—whether they drop out (i.e., do not complete their programs and do not intend to complete them), stop out (i.e., take a break from their programs but plan to return to complete), and/or opt out (i.e., attain their goals despite not completing) (Bonham & Luckie, 1993a & 1993b)—has an impact on recruitment and retention for these adult learners. It also has implications for improving the research literature on factors that contribute or hinder the success of UCE adult learners who persist and succeed in their careers through pursuit of further learning, as well as implications for institutional success and viability. This exploratory research will contribute to our knowledge of UCE adult learners who participate in and/or leave their non-credit certificate programs; identify strategies for retention and persistence; and provide some direction for policy, research, and practice.

Methodology

This exploratory case study examined the characteristics of adult learners in UCE non-credit certificate programs and their motivation, goals, and barriers to participation, including their perception of and satisfaction with their classroom and educational experiences, and identified recommendations for improvement. Qualitative methods that formed the basis for this paper, including telephone interviews with an open- and closed-ended questionnaire and content analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Creswell, 1998; Franklin, 1996; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; McCracken, 1988; Tutty, Rothery, & Grinnell, 1996), explored their classroom and educational experiences.

The interviews collected in-depth data often not obtained in surveys. The content and dynamics of the conversation also served as rich sources of information. All interviews of approximately 30 minutes were audiotaped. Audiotapes were transcribed to facilitate analysis of the data. Demographic data collected from the initial survey from which these interviewees were drawn provide the background characteristics and representativeness of participants.

Population and Sample

The selection criteria for possible study participants from the UMCE database were that the student was admitted to a program after March 31, 2003; the student had not graduated and the time allowed for program completion had not expired; and the student had not registered for a course between April 1, 2007, and March 31, 2008. In April 2008, 500 students who met the criteria were identified from the database and invited to complete surveys. Seventy respondents (14%) completed the surveys and were invited to participate in telephone interviews. Data from telephone interviews conducted in the winter of 2009 and demographic data from the survey form the base for this paper. Forty-six of the 70 respondents indicated their willingness to participate in the 30-minute interview. Although all 46 were contacted, only 25 agreed to participate. Of the 25, 11 were removed from the database because they had returned to classes and were completing their programs: two females were in the ACC program; one male and two females were in the CIM program; one male was in the FMA program; two females were in the CMC program; and three females were in the HRM program. The remaining 14 were interviewed, for a 71% response rate (i.e., removing 11 from the 46). To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, all identifying marks were removed and codes and pseudonyms were used.

Data Analysis

Data were collected through a semi-structured interview process. The interviews allowed probing and redirection of information as well as the collection of rich, thick data. Data collection and analysis were intertwined and ongoing throughout the research process. Transcripts were analyzed individually and collectively using a horizontal and vertical content analysis process to confirm and refute categories and develop themes and patterns. Provisional interpretations and categories were identified through matching related concepts, observations, events, and activities. As concepts were reiterated, their relevance to a category was enhanced. Categories were then confirmed, refuted, or expanded in subsequent content analysis. Validity was attained through triangulation of data; that is, reviewing data after each interview, identifying and cross-checking the categories, and maintaining and reflecting on the field notes kept during the research process (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Findings

The findings are outlined in six sections: demographics, motivations for participation, intentions and achievement of educational goals, barriers to participation, educational and

classroom experiences, and recommendations for improvement. Excerpts from selected participants are used to illustrate the themes that emerged from the data.

Demographics

Demographics of the 14 interviewees drawn from the 70 who completed the surveys include gender, age, marital status and dependent children, educational background, and income. Only program and gender information are available for the original sample of 500 students initially identified from the UMCE database. Table 1 provides a comparison of programs

Table 1: Certificates and Gender—Original Sample, Survey Respondents, and Interviewees

Program	Original sample			Survey		Interviews	
	No. of students/ % of total original sample	No. of male students/ % of program total	No. of female students/ % of program total	No. of male respondents/ % of total respondents per program	No. of female respondents/ % of total respondents per program	No. of male interviewees/ % of total interviewees per program	No. of female interviewees/ % of total interviewees per program
ACC	(38) 7.6%	(8) 21.1%	(30) 78.9%	-	(6) 100%	-	-
CIM	(198) 39.6%	(106) 53.5%	(92) 46.5%	(11) 50.0%	(11) 50.0%	(2) 50.0%	(2) 50.0%
CACE	(68) 13.6%	(22) 32.4%	(46) 67.6%	(3) 25.0%	(9) 75.0%	(1) 50.0%	(1) 50.0%
CAM-UM**	(22) 4.4%	(16) 72.7%	(6) 27.3%	-	(1) 100%	-	-
FMA	(44) 8.8%	(11) 25.0%	(33) 75.0%	(2) 33.3%	(4) 66.7%	(1) 33.3%	(2) 66.7%
CMC/ CMR	(20) 4.0%	(4) 20.0%	(16) 80.0%	(1) 25.0%	(3) 75.0%	-	-
HRM	(110) 22.0%	(20) 18.2%	(90) 81.8%	(1) 5.3%	(18) 94.7%	-	(5) 100%
Total	(500) 100%	(187) 37.4%	(313) 62.6%	(18) 25.7%	(52) 74.3%	(4) 28.6%	(10) 71.4%

**The CAM program has a number of specializations; this study included the specialization in Utilities Management only.

and gender for the original sample, survey respondents, and interviewees. Overall, females outnumbered males in the original sample, survey responses, and interviews. As expected, there are more females in human and social services programs (e.g., ACC, CACE, FMA, CMC/CMR, and HRM), while there are more males represented in management-type programs (e.g., CIM and CAM-UM). In terms of programs and gender, interviewees are representative of the original sample and survey respondents.

As shown in Table 2, interviewees are reflective of the major certificate programs (i.e., CIM, CACE, FMA, and HRM).

Table 2: *Certificates—Original Sample, Survey Respondents, and Interviewees*

Program	No. of students in original sample/% of total	No. of survey respondents/% of total	No. of interviewees/% of total
ACC	(38) 7.6%	(6) 8.6%	-
CIM	(198) 39.6%	(22) 31.4%	(4) 28.6%
CACE	(68) 13.6%	(12) 17.1%	(2) 14.3%
CAM-UM	(22) 4.4%	(1) 1.4%	-
FMA	(44) 8.8%	(6) 8.6%	(3) 21.4%
CMC/CMR	(20) 4.0%	(4) 5.7%	-
HRM	(110) 22.0%	(19) 27.1%	(5) 35.7%
Total	(500) 100%	(70) 100%	(14) 100%

As shown in Table 3, the majority (71.4%) of the 14 interviewees were female; all HRM, half of the CIM and CACE, and two-thirds of the FMA interviewees were female.

Table 3: *Gender—Original Sample, Survey Respondents, and Interviewees*

Gender	No. of students in original sample/% of total	No. of survey respondents/% of total	No. of interviewees/% of total
Male	(187) 37.4%	(18) 25.7%	(4) 28.6%
Female	(313) 62.6%	(52) 74.3%	(10) 71.4%
Total	500 (100%)	(70) 100%	(14) 100%

As shown in Table 4, survey respondents and interviewees are reflective of all age categories. However, the majority (71.5%) of interviewees were aged 40–59.

Table 4: *Age—Survey Respondents and Interviewees*

Age group	No. of survey respondents/% of total	No. of interviewees/% of total
20–29	(7) 10.0%	(2) 14.3%
30–39	(23) 32.9%	(1) 7.1%
40–49	(26) 37.1%	(6) 42.9%
50–59	(10) 14.3%	(4) 28.6%
60–69	(2) 2.9%	(1) 7.1%
Missing	(2) 2.9%	-
Total	(70) 100%	(14) 100%

As shown in Table 5, survey respondents and interviewees are represented in all marital status categories except one (widowed). The majority of both groups were married.

Table 5: *Marital Status—Survey Respondents and Interviewees*

Marital status	No. of survey respondents/% of total	No. of interviewees/% of total
Married/ common law	(48) 68.6%	(10) 71.4%
Single	(9) 12.9%	(2) 14.3%
Separated/ divorced	(12) 17.1%	(2) 14.3%
Widowed	(1) 1.4%	-
Total	(70) 100%	(14) 100%

As shown in Table 6, the majority of survey respondents and interviewees who answered a question about dependents indicated that they had at least one to three dependent children at home, which has had a negative impact on their UCE participation because of extracurricular activities.

Table 6: *Dependent Children at Home—Survey Respondents and Interviewees*

Dependents at home	No. of survey respondents/% of total	No. of interviewees/% of total
One dependent	(18) 25.7%	(4) 28.6%
Two dependents	(17) 24.3%	(3) 21.4%
Three dependents	(8) 11.4%	(1) 7.1%
Missing	(27) 38.6%	(6) 42.9%
Total	(70) 100%	(14) 100%

As shown in Table 7, the majority of survey respondents and interviewees had completed a university degree or community college.

Table 7: Educational Background—Survey Respondents and Interviewees

Educational background	No. of survey respondents/% of total	No. of interviewees/% of total
High school	(3) 4.3%	-
Technical/trade school	(2) 2.9%	-
College	(6) 8.6%	(2) 14.3%
University	(41) 58.6%	(8) 57.1%
Missing	(18) 25.7%	(4) 28.6%
Total	(70) 100%	(14) 100%

As shown in Table 8, the majority of survey respondents and interviewees had an annual household income of \$60,000 or more. More than half (54.3%) of interviewees and survey respondents indicated that their employers paid their tuition.

Table 8: Income—Survey Respondents and Interviewees

Income	No. of survey respondents/% of total	No. of interviewees/% of total
Less than \$20,000	(2) 2.9%	(1) 7.1%
\$20,000–\$39,999	(3) 4.3%	-
\$40,000–\$59,999	(13) 18.6%	(4) 28.6%
\$60,000–\$79,999	(13) 18.6%	(2) 14.3%
\$80,000–\$99,999	(9) 12.9%	(1) 7.1%
\$100,000 +	(26) 37.1%	(6) 42.9%
Missing	(4) 5.7%	-
Total	(70) 100%	(14) 100%

Motivations for Participation

Interviewees indicated they were taking their programs for a number of interrelated reasons, including goals, joy of learning, and social factors. However, the most compelling was goal orientation, including advancing their careers, supplementing and/or enhancing their knowledge, changing their careers, securing employment, gaining a professional designation/certification, and upgrading their skills. The excerpts that follow illustrate the goal-oriented motivation.

Goal orientation. Four participants' views represented this theme. Nora (CIM) indicated:

I needed to round up my education. I am an engineer by trade and I have never had a lot of exposure to accounting or finance. So I took some courses I needed ... It is a little overwhelming at work and I can't commit to take any more ... I know I am only four courses from finishing, but it is a time constraint with things right now being a little bit tough in manufacturing.

Rose (CIM) stated, "I was trying to upgrade my communication skills; how to write and communicate better." Ken enrolled to receive a designation: "I took the program to achieve the CIM designation; that was one of the motivations but I did not complete it." And Lori reported:

You need to have your certificate before you can get a job in the HR field. There are people who got their certificate, and they were still not in HR positions because they did not have the experience. So, it was a catch 22 situation. You couldn't get a job without a certificate, and you couldn't have the job because you didn't have the experience ... I would like to complete it.

Joy of learning. A small number of participants indicated additional reasons for taking the program: to gain knowledge for its own sake, for continuous learning, and for a love of learning. Two participants represented this theme. John (CIM) stated, "I wanted entertainment or to turn on my brain ... I wanted to be inspired or excited by learning." Liz (FMA) said:

I am interested in higher learning ... I wanted to learn things that I did not know before and wanted more clarity on ... Finance ... I never really worked in it ... but it was what I wanted to know about ... I go back to school not because my employer requires it but because I want to have the experience of learning ... when I am done this course I might take something else. If I am not learning, I am going backwards ... I like to keep learning.

Socialize or activity. An even smaller number of participants indicated that other reasons for taking the program were to socialize, including meeting new people and expanding personal networks. Vic (FMA) said it best: "To meet people; I make contacts, see how

things work ... get connected with a new generation and networking purposes ... for a successful career, good networking is very important.”

Intentions and Achievement of Educational Goals

Interviewees were asked about their goals and intentions at the time of registration and how these related to their subsequent educational participation and outcomes. Six of 14 participants felt they had achieved their goals. Of the five HRM participants, only one said her goal (to advance in the field) was achieved. The others reported that their goals—namely, to enter the field (2); to gain specialized knowledge of the field (1); and to obtain a promotion (1)—had not been achieved.

Of the four CIM participants, two stated they had achieved their goals, namely, to upgrade skills (1) and get knowledge outside the engineering field (1); two participants did not achieve their goals, which were to turn their brain back on and entertain themselves (1) and to obtain the CIM designation because the program was not completed (1).

Two of the three FMA participants stated they had not achieved their goals (to update their skills) because of illness (1) and financial difficulty (1); the other had met her goal (to achieve higher learning). Two tried to withdraw from the course but missed the deadline by one day and did not write the final exam. They received an F in the course and were not motivated to continue the program because of the grade (1 participant) and being laid off (1).

The two CACE participants said they had achieved their goals. One had changed fields and no longer required the program, while the other was in the program for a month and then dropped out or transferred out because of personal matters. This participant subsequently enrolled at a community college.

Barriers to Participation

Interviewees were asked if and why they had withdrawn and/or had temporarily suspended their studies. More than half indicated they had only temporarily suspended their studies as a result of interrelated deterrents, including situational deterrents (e.g., time constraints, work and family pressures, lack of financial resources); dispositional deterrents (e.g., lack of motivation, time, and energy; change of focus); institutional deterrents (e.g., lack of depth in content, no value added, course unavailability); and systemic deterrents (lack of flexibility, red tape). Only two participants (CIM and FMA) indicated they had permanently withdrawn because of university bureaucracy, and two others were in the process of completing their studies. The following illustrates the interrelated deterrent themes.

Situational. Six participants' comments spoke to this theme. Nora (CIM) stated, “There are more things that I feel I have to learn but I have other pressures right now. I just do not have the time at present to finish the courses.” Rose (CIM) added, “I have a new business on top of my job ... I really do want to continue the program ... I cannot find the time right now.” Ken (CIM) said, “I work full time. I have a family with busy schedules ... balancing home and family is the real reason that I discontinued at this time.” John (CIM) indicated, “There were some things going on in my life and I could not commit the time to it.” Vic

(FMA) stated, "I was working for a finance department, but after I was laid off I was financially short. It did not make sense for me to continue ... I already had a degree and I was just updating." And Liz (FMA) said, "I discontinued because my mom got really sick ... I had to go out of town for three months ... I could not continue."

Dispositional. Five participants' views reflected this theme. Lori (HRM) reported:

A lot of family issues have come up: a death in the family, aging parents, I broke my wrist and was in a cast for two months ... it has been one thing after another ... school has not been a priority for me.

Gail (HRM) indicated: "It was evident that the position that I was looking for was not going to be offered to me. So it was not in my best interest to proceed." Joy (HRM) argued:

I got married, I got pregnant ... I had a very difficult pregnancy ... I moved twice and with working full time ... I did not have the time or energy to take courses in the evenings ... I also found it tough to find work in this profession ... I became less motivated to finish knowing that I might not get a job in the field.

John (CIM) indicated, "There were some things going on in my life that I could not commit the time to it." And Maureen (CACE) stated, "I would have liked to complete the program but when you are dealing with work and family, it is one of those things. I took a different turn in my work; it was not practical for me to finish it."

Institutional. Three participants' views described this theme. Louise (HRM) said:

I already had my B.Com... I was looking to complement that and help prepare for the CHRP exams ... It did not offer the level of detail that I needed. There was no value added for me to continue ... I have not permanently withdrawn ... if there is something that is a good fit for my career development ... I would take it.

Ken (CIM) indicated:

I did not find it overly challenging and I just did not have the time to commit ... I have temporarily suspended my studies ... I have been in a management role for at least 10+ years and I found the content too basic, so maybe it was not the right program for me.

And Liz (FMA) said, "My mom got really sick ... I had to go out of town for three months ... I could not continue ... I did not have the right class; the one I missed during the fall I did not have it so I had to skip one year."

Systemic. Two participants' comments illustrated this theme. John (CIM) indicated:

There was no flexibility in the system that would allow me to suspend my registration and pick it up at a later date without either failing the course or losing my money ... my son committed suicide ... university was not important to me ... it was university bureaucracy ... If I decide to take something it would not be with them. It is a small protest on my part.

And Anna (FMA) stated:

I did not write the examination ... I was sick ... that F really upsets me ... I missed the deadline by one day and it was too rigid for me ... I just did not get back to the university to cancel on time ... she said I could not withdraw because I had missed the deadline.

Educational and Classroom Experiences

Interviewees were asked to elaborate on their educational and classroom experiences with respect to quality of content, relevance of content, and quality of classroom instruction with similar post-secondary education programs. The majority confirmed that they were extremely and/or very satisfied with their educational and classroom experiences even though some of them had not achieved their goals. They also perceived quality of content, relevance of content, and quality of instruction to be higher in comparison with their experiences at similar institutions. The major interrelated themes that emerged from the data were relevant, practical and hands-on; learner-focused; and nurturing and caring instructors.

Relevant, practical, and hands-on. Seven participants' responses illustrated this theme. Nora (CIM) stated, "I got out of the courses what I needed to help me with the day-to-day business ... it was a very positive experience." Even John (CIM), who had a poor experience with the bureaucracy, said, "It was relevant ... the courses were pertinent to my job ... When I took the other program it was strictly academic." Rose (CIM) continued, "The courses I took benefitted me more at my job ... they gave me more understanding ... the instructors were very informed, very animated, and they enjoyed teaching ... you could tell that they wanted to be there; they made it high quality." Lori (HRM) concurred: "The instructors were working in the field ... they brought relevant, real-life situations and examples to the classroom. It was very helpful. The learners were in the field; they had experience to bring ... I gained a lot of knowledge from them ... There were networking opportunities." Charlene (HRM) agreed: "The instructors, content, and materials were great." Liz (FMA) offered, "The instructors were really good; they were industry people with background in the field." And Josee (CACE) thought, "The content was relevant to work and general enough to include different disciplines and different organizations ... it was very practical and not too academic."

Learner-focused. Four participants' comments illustrated this theme. Lori (HRM) offered, "The instructors were working in the field ... they brought relevant, real-life situations and examples to the classroom. It was very helpful. The learners were in the field; they had experience to bring." Gail (HRM) agreed: "The courses were great; the timetable was great for mature students who work and it was close to me ... there was good contact and communication, including written." Rose (CIM) stated, "The courses that I took actually benefitted me more at my job ... they gave me more understanding." And Josee (CACE) echoed these themes:

The format was much more practical ... you got readings beforehand rather than having everything on the actual day of the course ... it was practical and theoretical ... the instructors were available for individual

questions. The feedback that they provided was very constructive and very individualized ... the credentials of the instructors, choice of text books, and teaching styles were excellent ... they were more directed at an adult learning situation and very participatory.

Nurturing and caring instructors. Four participants' views demonstrated this theme. Nora (CIM) stated, "The courses were great and absolutely fantastic ... it was the instructor and the one-to-one interaction ... it was the amount of instruction and the quality of instruction." Rose (CIM) said, "The instructors made the time to explain and answer questions ... it was hands-on ... and there was more interaction from the instructor." Charlene (HRM) confirmed: "The instructors were caring; the course materials and outlines were comprehensive." And Josee (CACE) echoed these themes: "The instructors were available for individual questions. The feedback that they provided was very constructive and very individualized."

Recommendations for Improvement

Interviewees were asked about the supports and services that would have helped them to continue their studies and whether they had any recommendations for improvement. The themes that emerged with respect to program improvements included format, course availability, and resources; time extension and flexibility; location, parking, and security; depth of content; and finance.

Format, course availability, resources. Five participants' views spoke to these themes. Lori (HRM) stated, "Getting to the class in the evening after working is hard for me. I have three kids, and they all do sports, and most of my evenings are filled with other activities." Gail (HRM) said, "I do not know if it is possible to make more courses available more evenings ... I chose my courses based on what was available on a Tuesday or Thursday night because those were the two nights that I had open." Louise (HRM) stipulated, "It would be nice to have alternative forms of delivery ... because my family is quite busy right now, so if I could do more things without actually having to be at a certain place and time; some more independent study would be great." Rose (CIM) stated, "Offer more courses at the downtown campus ... I work downtown, so it is better if the courses were downtown so I can go directly from work rather than go home, get in the car and go south." And Liz (FMA) indicated, "I would like to have more on-line resources, like a chat group and webcam for the distance learning ... so you could talk back and forth on questions and problems you are having."

Time extension and flexibility. Four participants' comments spoke to time extension and flexibility. Nora (CIM) stated, "I know that I am going to pass the seven-year limitations ... I am probably six years right now. If they would allow me a couple of years' extension I could pull off a course a year to get it finished." John (CIM) recommended:

They should be more willing to accommodate students ... but they treat everyone the same ... that way nobody has to think, nobody has to make a decision ... it is easier to say no than to make a thoughtful consideration ... there might be extenuating circumstances at different

times in people's lives but I did not feel there was any interest in doing anything other than the standard administrative rule.

Charlene (HRM) said, "I need time off work to continue my studies ... I do not know how much on-line courses were available ... I did not look into it ... but I would need a time extension." And Anna (FMA) indicated, "I missed the deadline by one day and it was too rigid for me ... I just did not get back to the university to cancel on time ... so she said that I could not withdraw because I had missed the deadline by one day."

Location, parking, and security. Excerpts from three participants illustrated these themes. Anna (FMA) said, "It was a parking issue ... walking between buildings when it was dark and 40 below. I found it hard to get myself up to go to class at night. It was scary walking in the dark ... I had to park a long way and walk." Nora (CIM) stated, "If I am working until six p.m. I cannot get to a seven o'clock class. I live outside the city ... I do not have a lot of time to devote to reading and homework ... but also the amount of time I am spending at work." And Gail (HRM) indicated, "I do not want to stay downtown at night during the winter ... if you were able to make more courses available at the Fort Garry Campus during the week that might have influenced my decision."

Depth of content. Two participants' comments illustrated this theme. Louise (HRM) stipulated:

Put in more applicable case studies and have the content of the course not just knowledge based. Anyone can read a textbook, it is different to apply the concepts appropriately ... I was looking for something that would continue to challenge me and add knowledge. It was very basic ... I think a content change would have been valuable.

And Ken (CIM) stated, "The level of the courses was too basic ... the content could be more challenging or segmented based on professional experience."

Finance. Finally, Vic (FMA) represented this theme: "I did not continue the program, not because I was not self-motivated ... I was working for a finance department but after I was laid off, I was financially short so it did not make sense for me to continue."

Discussion and Conclusions

Understanding retention and persistence of adult learners in UCE non-credit certificate programs is critical to educators, policy makers, and researchers. Albeit limited, the results of this study provided insight into these adult learners and their motivations, goals, barriers, educational experiences, supports and services, and recommendations. Also, these findings have limited generalizability because of the case study approach that focuses on one institution in Manitoba. Nevertheless, a number of observations can be made based on the data and the related literature.

Demographics

The majority of interviewees represented young, married women with one to three dependent children at home who are actively engaged in extracurricular activities. Most

students work full time, have annual household income of \$60,000 or more, and have completed post-secondary education such as a university degree and/or college diploma. More than half have their tuition fees paid by their employers. They are pursuing a range of programs, including management (e.g., CIM) and human and social service (e.g., HRM, FMA, and CACE). These factors resonate with the picture portrayed in the literature; that is, those with high levels of education generally tend to have high levels of participation in continuing educational activities, high economic achievement, and high socioeconomic status. Furthermore, younger age groups, which include more women than men, continue to be employer-supported to participate in educational activities.

Motivations and Barriers for Participation

The findings related to motivations and barriers are reflected in the literature. The most compelling motivation for these adult learners to pursue their program is to achieve a work-related goal such as advance their career, further their career goals, supplement their knowledge, advance or enhance what they learned in their degrees, achieve a professional designation, and improve or upgrade their skills. A few held motivations related to the joy of learning or learning for its own sake and a desire to socialize, which was reframed as seeking networking opportunities to achieve a successful career. However, unlike adult learners in higher-education programs who may not have careers upon entry, the underlying reason for participating appeared to be utilitarian and extrinsic; that is, these adult learners wanted to enhance their careers.

Although the interrelated barriers to participation that they experienced resonate with the literature, for these adult learners the two compelling factors were situational (time constraints, work and family pressures) and dispositional (lack of motivation, time, and energy; change of focus). Institutional (lack of depth in content, no value added, course unavailability) and systemic (lack of flexibility, red tape) factors appeared to have less of an impact on their ability to participate. For these adult learners, retention and persistence may be more about work-life balance (situational and dispositional) and less about pre-entry characteristics, initial and/or emergent career goals and commitment upon entry into university, and academic and social integration into the life of the institution.

Intention and Goal Achievement

These adult learners have clearly defined career goals and institutional and final commitment because upon initial registration they intended to complete their programs. Even those who had discontinued their programs had not permanently withdrawn, but had temporarily suspended their studies and were not taking courses elsewhere. Therefore, the assumption of emergent career goals as critical to persistence and retention may not apply to these adult learners because they have careers and career-related goals upon entry.

Academic and social integration also does not appear to be a critical factor for these adults learners who are middle class, are married, have careers, work full time, and have active dependent children who are engaged in extracurricular activities that may negatively impact their academic and social integration because of family obligations, time constraints, a change in focus, finances, and distance. Indeed, integration into extracurricular

activities outside the classroom does not apply to these adult learners because of their obligations and responsibilities. Rather the site of integration for these adult learners may well be their satisfaction with the quality of their classroom and educational experience, including interaction with instructors, peers, and staff of the institution, which may enhance integration and prevent dropout.

Upon initial registration their intention was to complete their programs and build and enhance their careers; the majority had not permanently withdrawn but only temporarily suspended their studies because of time constraints, work and family pressures, change of focus, inconvenient course schedules, and finances. However, institutional constraints such as bureaucratic administrative constraints (i.e., withdrawal deadline dates and time-extension policy) also negatively influenced persistence and success. While the majority stopped out because of factors external to the institution (i.e., work–life balance) a minority dropped out (i.e., permanently withdrew) because of institutional and systemic practices. These adult learners' characteristics, initial goals, motivations, barriers, and commitment appear to be important factors in their retention decisions; in addition, their classroom and educational experience, including program quality and program satisfaction, may also impact retention and success.

Educational Experience

The results with respect to achieving their educational goals, barriers to completion, program satisfaction, and quality of their educational experience are reflected in and build on the themes in the literature. The reasons for not achieving their goals were related to situational factors, dispositional factors, institutional factors, and systemic issues.

Further, the results with respect to individual experiences within the institution are consistent with one of the clearest conclusions of research on student departure—that individual experiences within the institution after entry are more important to persistence and departure than what has gone on before entry. Satisfaction is seen to be positively correlated with persistence and one of the most important factors in dropout among non-traditional learners. Almost all interviewees were extremely or very satisfied with their programs. Even among those who had not achieved their educational goals, a few indicated they were still very satisfied with the program and planned to return. However, a few who also had not achieved their educational goals were very dissatisfied with their educational experience and dropped out.

With respect to the quality of their classroom and educational experiences with similar post-secondary institutions, the majority felt that quality of content, relevance of content, and quality of instruction were very good. Thus, satisfaction with programs and consequent retention, persistence, and success were also related to the perception of their classroom and educational experience. The themes that emerged from the data related to classroom and educational experience are consistent with andragogical assumptions; that is, that education for adults needs to be relevant, practical, hands-on, and learner-focused; and that it needs to have nurturing and caring instructors in inclusive learning communities. These themes may reflect the andragogical approach (Knowles, 1980) that drives UCE programs and suggest that the site of retention, persistence, and success for these adult

learners may well be inclusive learning classrooms (i.e., active learning practices and active doing and thinking) that may lead to academic engagement and achievement.

Recommendations for Improvement

The results resonate with the literature with respect to non-traditional learners who juggle multiple roles (i.e., work/career, education, family, and community) and the barriers they face. Given participants’ situational, dispositional, institutional, and systemic barriers, important themes for program improvement and, hence, effective recruitment and retention strategies emerged: format, course availability, schedule, delivery options, and resources. Time extensions to complete the program and flexibility in the application of policies are also seen as critical to retention and persistence. Other factors to consider include program location, parking, and security, especially for the mostly female audience. Finally, a lack of depth in some content and financial issues need attention. Addressing these factors may positively impact these adult learners’ work–life balance and, consequently, retention, persistence, and success.

Conclusion

Overall, the findings are aligned with concepts in the related literature with respect to factors that enhance and/or inhibit persistence and retention—such as career goals (albeit not initial career goals), commitment and institutional experience with the bureaucratic system more than with the academic and social systems—and satisfaction with classroom and educational experience as the site of social and academic integration. These findings lay the basis for continuing research that will attempt to reframe our understanding of retention in terms of the nature of adult learners in UCE non-credit programs who have careers, work full time, have family commitments, and have specific career-related goals upon entry. The need for work–life balance, as reflected in situational and dispositional barriers, is critical for these adult learners rather than academic and social integration into the life of the institution. These adult learners must balance their studies with external requirements (i.e., work, family responsibilities, dependent children), leaving no time for extracurricular activities and leaving them at risk of not completing their studies. As Rautopuro and Vaisanen (2001) suggest, more research focusing on these adult learners is needed to facilitate the creation of learning environments that best meet their educational needs and goals and to identify effective intervention strategies to reduce dropout, stop-out, and/or opt-out rates among these students.

Further, more research is needed to better understand classroom and educational experiences as the site of academic and social integration, as well as to better understand the politics of institutional policies and practices that may provide further insight into this population of adult learners. Research with a random sample and/or a control group of UCE non-credit certificate adult learners who have successfully completed their certificates may confirm the barriers they face, whether they opt out because they have achieved their goals or drop out because of the politics of education, and how important the classroom experience is in their retention and persistence. Such research would increase

our understanding of retention, persistence, and success of UCE adult learners and provide a basis for marketing and enhancing institutional sustainability.

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