

RESPONDING TO ADULT LEARNERS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Carol E. Kasworm, Cheryl J. Polson, and Sarah Jane Fishback. (2002). Malabar, Florida: Kreiger Publishing Company, 190 pages.

Responding to Adult Learners in Higher Education offers a thoughtful assessment of the unique needs and concerns of today's adult learners. Useful strategies as to how institutions might better meet these needs in more constructive ways are detailed throughout the book.

Using a series of demographic and evaluative data, the book begins with an introductory chapter which broadly defines the adult undergraduate student—those students 25 years of age or older—and explores why they are different. While the national statistics on education and socio-economic backgrounds presented here are gathered from American colleges and universities, much of the information contained in this chapter is applicable to the Canadian context. Having defined the adult student, the following six chapters offer higher education institutions substantial but practical advice on how to provide this group with a successful educational experience.

There are a number of U.S. universities and colleges who either focus the attention of their institution on, or offer programs designed specifically for, the adult undergraduate student market. These programs have been successful in attracting adult students because they have implemented marketing strategies that clearly understand the adult learner's world. As the authors of this book point out, if a successful marketing strategy is not followed with proper follow-up, particularly in the area of student services, retention may well become an issue. It is critical that universities and colleges find ways for adult learners to conveniently access institutional information that will assist them in attaining their academic goals, including an academic advising process designed to support their changing needs.

Another chapter is devoted to the effectiveness of adult learning in a community-based environment. Communities of learning, sometimes referred to as cohort-based learning, result when faculty and staff connect with the complex world of the adult student. Juggling work and family responsibilities along with university studies over an extended period of time, while highly exhilarating, can also be extremely stressful. It is unfortunate that, aside from a brief mention of research by Kasworm and Blowers (1994) that "cohort experiences were judged to be highly effective for both their learning and for their psychological well-being" (p. 109), the authors give

little attention to the value of cohort-based degree completion programs. My own experience with adult students in cohort programs is that the cohort structure plays a critical role, and is undoubtedly one of the major contributors to student persistence and success in completing their studies.

The book suggests that, while some progress has been made toward accommodating the adult learner, a number of challenges remain for higher education. More effort is required to ensure institutions provide adult students with an appropriate level of understanding and support. Unfortunately for most adult students, unless they are part of a specialized cohort program, few opportunities exist for them to effectively express their concerns as a group. Whether it's through advocacy or by simply providing some alternative means for adult students to communicate their needs, it is imperative that universities and colleges be aware of and respond to this small but growing population of students.

The book concludes by reiterating the six recommendations of the report of the Commission on Non-Traditional Study (1973) which, interestingly enough, emphasizes student needs over institutional needs. As the authors suggest, these recommendations are as relevant today as they were over 25 years ago. Questions about whether we have moved any closer to implementation, and whether higher education is genuinely interested in giving priority to student needs over institutional needs, are implied.

Responding to Adult Learners in Higher Education turns our attention to the lack of formal identification of the population of adult learners at our universities and colleges. While there are many broad and specific strategies that affect adult learners, it is only by examining assumptions and practices currently in place and beginning discussions about how they might be changed or improved that our efforts to attract and retain adult students will succeed. Also evident is the authors' wisdom and maturity, and their wealth of experience working with and understanding the adult learner.

The book can assist the reader to further understand that "a variety of strategies are required to meaningfully engage a diverse set of adults in learning that is applicable both within and beyond the academic world" (p. 101). This publication should be of interest to university and college faculty, and to program administrators of adult education programs.

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