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## NOTE FROM THE EDITORS

Welcome to the third volume of the National Association of Branch Campus Administrator's (NABCA) *Access Journal*. We are excited to provide a vehicle for higher education administrators to share their research and experiences, specifically as it applies to individuals working at a college or university site located away from the main campus. Included in this issue are two very relevant articles that provide excellent insights and research for branch campus administrators.

The first article examines the teaching experience at branch campuses from the perspective of faculty members, and the second article discusses a series of current challenges faced by administrators who work in adult higher education.

We look forward to publishing the next issue of the *Access Journal* this spring and encourage you to submit your research during our "Call for Papers" beginning in January 2018. It is our sincere hope that you find the information within the NABCA Access Journal informative and useful.

Sincerely,

Jeremy Couch, Ed.D.  
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## **Teaching at Branch Campuses: The Faculty Experience**

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## Teaching at Branch Campuses: The Faculty Experience

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### ABSTRACT

There is limited research on the perceptions of faculty who teach branch campus students. Exploratory in nature, this qualitative study explored the branch campus teaching experiences of a particular subset of educators – those who teach in social work education programs. The paper will discuss social work faculty members’ perspectives about the advantages and challenges of teaching branch campus students. Eighty-one social work educators from twenty-six states completed an online survey developed by the researchers. The survey included qualitative questions that explored both resident and non-resident faculty members’ perceptions regarding the advantages and disadvantages of teaching branch campus students. The predominant themes that emerged from the data identified that connection to students and faculty recognition have a significant impact on faculty members’ perceptions about the advantages and disadvantages of teaching branch campus students. Both faculty members who were resident and non-resident expressed satisfaction teaching an underserved student population that is motivated, diverse, and full of life experience.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Seventy-nine percent of students attend college in their home state, most within a few hours' drive of home (The National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2016). Limited by financial constraints, family responsibilities, personal characteristics, lifestyle choices, or a combination of these factors, many of these students are fundamentally place-bound. They often seek education within a 30-minute commuting range leading to the increased demand for branch campuses (Fonseca & Bird, 2007). Growing out of the need to increase accessibility to students where higher education may have been previously unreachable, branch campuses have proliferated (Hoyt & Howell, 2012).

Even with the growth of online education, students often desire access to a physical campus where they are able to physically interact with classmates and faculty (Hoyt & Howell, 2012; Merzer, 2008). Providing greater access to higher education for students who are frequently first-generation and living in rural areas (Ellis, Sawyer, Gill, Medlin, & Wilson, 2005; Fonseca & Bird, 2007; Oliaro & Trotter, 2010; Wolfe & Strange, 2003), branch campuses provide a learning environment with many unique advantages (Austin, Sorcinelli, & McDaniels, 2007). Branch campus classes are typically smaller and offer more flexible class schedules, and may be more conveniently located for students who are unable to commute or live nearer to the parent campus (Bird, 2007; Ellis, Sawyer, Gill, Medlin, & Wilson, 2005; Oliaro & Trotter, 2010; Wolfe & Strange, 2003). Furthermore, in addition to the reputation of the parent campus, students may choose a branch campus given their preference for more personalized relationships with faculty, staff, and classmates who may also

share similar life experiences (Bird, 2007; Ellis, Sawyer, Gill, Medlin, & Wilson, 2005; Hoyt & Howell, 2012; Mindrup, 2012; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991 [as cited in Merzer, 2008]).

Despite the significant contributions branch campuses make to the education of otherwise underserved students, relatively little empirical research has examined the experiences and perspectives of branch campus faculty. It is all the more important, therefore, that campuses at the frontier of a university's educational reach be seriously examined. Exploratory in nature, this qualitative study explored the branch campus teaching experiences of a particular subset of educators – those who teach in social work education programs.

## **REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

Also referred to as regional, satellite, and extension campuses, branch campuses are educational facilities located at a distance from an institution's main or parent campus that typically offer degree programs also available at the parent campus (Merzer, 2008; National Association of Branch Campus Administrators [NABCA], n.d.; The National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2006). In addition to classes, these campuses may provide student services, and may be co-located with other institutions (e.g., a community college) or may be standalone facilities (Bird, 2007; Bebko & Huffman, 2011). A variety of means of delivering educational content are used at branch campus locations including Interactive Video Services (IVS), face-to-face classes, and online education. In some cases, faculty may commute to the branch campus to teach face-to-face or teach remotely (e.g., via interactive television or online) from the parent campus, while others may be resident faculty at the branch

campus and primarily teach face-to-face (Bird, 2007). Social work education is utilizing all of these methods (Ayala, 2009; Pardasani, Goldkind, Heyman, Cross-Denny, 2012).

Branch campuses serve a higher percentage of nontraditional students who are place-bound, commute, may be older, and strive to balance multiple responsibilities including work and care for families and may require closer academic advising (Bozick & DeLuca, 2005; Choy, 2002; Compton, Cox, & Lanaan, 2006; Fonseca & Bird, 2007; Knefelkamp & Stewart, 1983; Mindrup, 2012). As such, branch campus personnel must be sensitive to – and accommodating of – the unique characteristics of these students (Mindrup, 2012).

While the empirical literature is limited, faculty who teach at branch campuses have reported both opportunities and challenges teaching on these campuses. Branch campus faculty have experiences and opportunities often not enjoyed by their colleagues based at their institution's main campus including: greater work autonomy; higher levels of collegiality across disciplines; the chance to work more closely with students including those who are nontraditional; having a greater role in campus life; and a greater level of engagement in the community (Bird, 2007; Poling, LoSchiavo, & Shatz, 2009; Wolfe & Strange, 2003). However, branch campus faculty members' access to resources may be more limited than at the parent campus and/or the campus itself may be perceived as having a lower status than the parent campus (McGrath, 2012; Merzer, 2008; Wolfe & Strange, 2003). In addition, because branch campus faculty members are sometimes the sole lead faculty member from their discipline, they may experience isolation and face additional workload pressures (e.g.,

advising, student recruitment into their discipline) (Merzer, 2008; Wolfe & Strange, 2003). Further, for faculty with research obligations, additional service demands may adversely impact their focus on scholarship (Wolfe & Strange, 2003). In fact, Fonseca and Bird (2007) have recommended that decisions about promotion and tenure should consider how to accommodate this reality. Moreover, supporting branch campus faculty entails the need to (1) appreciate the unique teaching and student advising needs at a branch campus; (2) promote frequent and open communication between campuses; (3) encourage collaboration and partnerships between parent campus and branch campus faculty members (as well as among branch campus faculty members); and (4) include branch faculty in departmental decision making (Merzer, 2008; Poling, LoSchiavo, & Shatz, 2009). However, whether the organizational culture of institutions with branch campuses adequately promotes or supports strategies like these is not known. Further, how branch campus faculty perceive the extent of their parent campus's support is unclear. Therefore, an exploration of the experiences and perceptions of branch campus educators regarding the support they receive was warranted. For this study, social work educators' observations and insights were investigated.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Selection of Subjects**

At the time of this study, no comprehensive database of social work programs at branch campuses was maintained by social work's accrediting body, the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE). Therefore, the authors and a graduate research assistant reviewed the website of each of the 542 institutions that delivered accredited social work programs in the U.S. at the time. In

addition, a request for programs to self-identify was posted to a social worker educator listserv. From this effort, 89 social work programs were determined to provide branch campus education. The program administrators from these programs were then emailed three requests to forward an invitation to participate in the study to their part-time and full-time faculty members who taught social work classes to their branch campus students.

### **Instrumentation**

Approved by the researchers' Institutional Review Board (IRB), a 55-item survey included items relevant to the institutional characteristics of branch campus social work education programs. The institutional characteristics included method of course delivery, the types of students in these programs, and the demographics and experiences of resident branch campus faculty and non-resident social work educators who taught branch campus students. In addition, the survey incorporated two open-ended questions regarding the advantages and disadvantages of teaching on a branch campus. An earlier version of the instrument was pilot tested with colleagues who had taught branch campus social work students to assess content and face validity.

### **Thematic Analysis**

Thematic analysis was used to identify patterns across the data derived from the two open-ended items regarding the advantages and disadvantages of teaching on a branch campus from the perspective of both resident and non-resident branch campus faculty. The process of coding took place in six phases. The researchers (1) familiarized themselves with the data; (2) created a grid and generated initial codes; (3) searched for themes among the codes; (4) reviewed and defined the themes; (5) named the themes;

and (6) reported out the final themes to each other. This approach best emphasized the perceptions of the survey participants and captured their broad range of experiences as resident and nonresident branch campus social work faculty members.

## **RESULTS**

### **Sample**

Eighty-one social work educators ( $n = 81$ ) from programs in 26 states responded to the survey. Sixty-four (79.0%) identified as female and 17 (21.0%) as male. Sixty-eight educators (84.0%) were white/non-Hispanic; 7 (8.6%) were African-American, 3 (3.7%) were Latino(a)/Hispanic, 3 (3.7%) were Asian/Pacific Islander, and 1 (1.2%) identified as American Indian/Native American. The majority ( $n = 64$ , 79.0%), reported they were full-time faculty members and 17 (21.0%) indicated they were part-time or adjunct faculty members. Eleven (13.6%) were Professors, 14 (17.3%) identified as Associate Professors, 25 (30.9%) were Assistant Professors, 27 (33.3%) were classified as a Lecturer or an Instructor, and 4 (4.9%) identified as "other". Twenty-one participants (25.9%) reported they were tenured, 22 (27.2%) were on the tenure track, 36 (44.4%) were not on the tenure track (though their institutions had a tenure system); and 2 (2.5%) reported their institution did not have a tenure system. Collectively, survey participants had taught social work courses for an average of 11.7 years ( $SD = 9.3$ ) with half having taught for 8 or more years. In terms of assignment, 29 (36%) were a resident faculty of the parent/main campus and 45 (56%) were a resident faculty member at the branch campus. Seven participants (9%) indicated they were not a resident faculty member on any campus.

## THEMATIC ANALYSIS

As noted, thematic analysis was used to identify patterns across the data relevant to the experiences and characterization of the advantages and disadvantages both resident and non-resident faculty identified relative to teaching in their branch campus programs. Twenty-three ( $n = 23$ ) non-resident faculty and thirty-eight ( $n = 38$ ) resident faculty members provided written comments. The following themes are reported by rank of frequency. (See Tables 1 and 2 for specific frequencies.) Advantages and disadvantages are discussed in order by highest indicators by resident faculty.

### ADVANTAGES OF TEACHING AT BRANCH CAMPUSES

***Theme 1: Autonomy and ownership of program.*** The most common theme for resident faculty was their expression of having autonomy and ownership of the social work program at the branch campus. This theme was not identified by non-resident faculty. The theme was expressed in several ways. For instance, respondents reported having more freedom and latitude to direct their programs. As one resident faculty shared, “I can coordinate the program and enjoy significant autonomy to shape it.” Similarly, another noted, “We have a lot of freedom to run our program on this campus.” For several, this sense of autonomy and ownership fostered a greater sense of satisfaction and responsibility: “Having a sense of 'ownership' and pride in the program.”

***Theme 2: Supportive environment.*** Working in a supportive environment emerged as the second most common theme for resident faculty. This was expressed in several forms. First, resident faculty felt

support from the administration at both the branch and parent campus. Support from department faculty was also noted. As a resident faculty member reported, “I receive support from administration and full-time faculty. The university provides supports that extends beyond the main campus walls to ensure that students and staff attending the branch campus receive the level of support needed and expected.” Several resident faculty expressed being close to their branch campus colleagues. A few supporting statements included, “We are very supportive of each other and work well together as a team”; “I have tighter knit relationships with my branch colleagues”; and one respondent highlighting the significance and importance of these relationships, “I never want to move from my branch campus position.”

***Theme 3: Connection with students.*** The next theme to emerge from the data was respondents’ sense of experiencing a connection with the students on a branch campus. This theme was primarily expressed by resident faculty. Faculty often attributed this connection with student to the ability to get to know their students more personally due to having smaller cohorts of students. One resident faculty shared: “Because of smaller cohorts, I get to know each student well.” This closer connection with students resulted in resident faculty being able to better meet students’ needs at a branch campus. As one resident faculty reported, “We are able to help students be successful and meet challenges with individualized, personal care.”

***Theme 4: Location/close to home.*** Resident faculty frequently stated that having the branch campus close to home was an advantage. This theme was not addressed as often by non-resident faculty. One resident faculty summarized the thoughts of several

faculty by stating: “I live in the same city as the branch campus so it is very convenient for me.”

**Theme 5: Removed from university/college politics.** Another theme extracted from resident faculty responses was the advantage of avoiding main campus politics. This theme was as frequently expressed as location/close to home by resident faculty. The expression of this theme was direct and succinct. One faculty member shared this common sentiment, “Being somewhat removed from the politics of the main campus.” Some resident faculty shared they are removed from the university politics while still feeling supported by administration. One resident faculty stated, “I am very well supported by leadership and yet I don't have to get tangled up in politics that may exist at the main campus.” This theme was not expressed by non-resident faculty.

**Theme 6: Smaller setting.** The theme describing the advantage of teaching in a smaller setting was expressed by both resident and non-resident faculty but more frequently by resident faculty participants. There were several ways in which this theme was expressed. Resident faculty discussed the advantage of having a smaller program which included a smaller cohort of students and smaller class sizes. One resident faculty shared: “I think being smaller makes us better able to respond to opportunities and challenges and make changes.” It was a resident faculty who shared: “Smaller class numbers allows me to build positive relationships with my students.” Another connotation expressed regarding a smaller setting was having a smaller faculty group at the branch campus. A resident faculty stated: “I enjoy the smaller and closer faculty unit. We are very supportive of each other and work well

together as a team.”

**Theme 7: Opportunities for interdisciplinary collaboration.** The resident faculty expressed an advantage of teaching at a branch campus was the opportunities to collaborate with other faculty in different disciplines. This theme did not emerge for non-resident faculty. The experience from resident faculty was that this collaboration was easier primarily due to having a smaller campus and offices next to each other rather than in separate building across the campus. One resident faculty shared, “It's easier to conduct interdisciplinary research. Our branch campus has mixed office space, meaning my office is just down the hall from faculty in other disciplines. This makes it easier to conduct research with them because we chat about projects in the hall that leads us to start them with greater ease.” A similar expression was also shared by another resident faculty who wrote, “Collaboration is easier in an environment where other faculty from other disciplines are also in residence.”

**Theme 8: Meeting needs of underserved students.** Themes 8 through 10 stand out as the most frequently expressed themes by non-resident faculty. These themes were also reported from resident faculty but not as frequently. It was Theme 8 that non-resident faculty expressed most frequently. For them, the opportunity to meet the needs of students who otherwise may not have the option to attend college as a major advantage of teaching at a branch campus. It was the rural student who was most often cited as the underserved student. Both resident and non-resident faculty indicated these students were unlikely to seek a college degree if it was not for the branch campus. The non-resident faculty expressed meeting needs in a variety of ways. One



way was by offering students with online course options as a way to reach an underserved demographic of students. Another non-resident faculty discussed meeting a need not only for the underserved student but also an underserved community. This faculty member shared, “Giving educational opportunities to students in more rural areas who might likely not be able to attend the main campus, thereby offers communities with more social workers needed at area social service programs.”

***Theme 9: Students with diversity of life experience.*** The second major theme for non-resident faculty was teaching students with a diversity of life experience. Both resident and non-resident faculty shared this theme by describing students at branch campuses as older than the traditional student and as a result having more life experiences to share in their classes. One resident faculty member stated: “Fantastic focused students who integrate a wealth of experience into their education and share with their classmates.” This sharing of experience included providing insights in the social work field. One non-resident faculty shared: “Students are older and are working in the field and see relevance of courses to develop and advance their skills

and knowledge.” The expression of diverse students also included demographic diversity. Both resident and non-resident faculty observed students as being older as compared to students at the main campus. A non-resident faculty stated: “Students are more diverse so there is more opportunity to see issues from multiple perspectives.” It was non-resident faculty who expressed this theme more frequently than resident faculty.

***Theme 10: Motivated students.*** This theme was expressed equally by resident and non-resident faculty. The description of motivation included seeing students as committed, focused, and ready to work. Resident faculty specifically identified students as being dedicated to their studies and that the students thoughtfully chose to major in social work. Several resident faculty shared observing this by stating, “Students are more motivated toward the profession,” and “The branch campus students participate much more in class.” Non-resident faculty expressed the theme of motivation by observing that students are happier in school and excited about learning. The motivated students theme was expressed more frequently by non-resident faculty.

Table 1  
Advantages of teaching at a branch campus ( $n = 36$ )

	<i>Resident Faculty n (%)</i>	<i>Non-Resident Faculty n (%)</i>	<i>Total</i>
Autonomy & ownership of program	13 (33.1%)	0 (0.0%)	13 (33.1%)
Supportive environment	10 (27.8%)	0 (0.0%)	10 (27.8%)
Connection to students	9 (25.0%)	1 (2.8%)	10 (27.8%)
Location/close to home	7 (19.4%)	3 (8.3%)	10 (27.7%)
Removed from university/college politics	6 (16.7%)	0 (0.0%)	6 (16.7%)
Smaller setting	5 (13.9%)	2 (5.6%)	7 (19.4%)
Opportunities for interdisciplinary collaboration	4 (11.1%)	0 (0.0%)	4 (11.1%)
Meeting needs of underserved students	3 (8.3%)	8 (22.2%)	11 (30.6%)
Students with diversity of life experience	4 (11.1%)	6 (16.7%)	10 (27.8%)
Motivated students	4 (11.1%)	4 (11.1%)	8 (22.2%)

## DISADVANTAGES OF TEACHING AT BRANCH CAMPUSES

**Theme 1: Isolation.** A major theme that emerged for disadvantages in working at a branch campus was isolation from the parent institution voiced only by the resident faculty and was overwhelmingly their foremost concern. The theme of isolation included, but was not limited to: lack of communication with parent campus; lack of a connection with colleagues and department faculty; not included in parent campus activities; and not being invited to meetings that impact branch campus students. One resident faculty commented, “Sometimes people make comments about hating to come to the branch campus. Often, people don’t know me when I go to faculty senate meetings and full professors ignore me.” Additionally, several faculty shared, “Not having more immediate access to management and not being included in more meetings that affect the students at the branch campus,” and “I feel out of the loop

regarding administration at the university level.” Finally, these faculty shared, “The downside is that I have to work harder than others to fully know what transpires at the main campus because I am flying a bit solo,” and “Aren’t seen as a full member of the parent campus.”

**Theme 2: Lack of understanding by main (parent) campus.** The second most frequent theme pulled from the data for resident faculty was the lack of understanding by the parent campus. Lack of understanding was described as not being treated as a full-time member of the department, not being considered when decisions are made, and a lack of understanding of the skills resident faculty bring to the branch campus. A common concern expressed by a resident faculty was, “Decisions are made for the branch campus based on assumptions determined elsewhere, and do not necessarily reflect the reality, needs, or culture of our campus.” This faculty shared, “Faculty from main and other branch

campuses do not fully understand my skills or workload, which is not a bother to me, but sometimes feels as though they don't have a real idea of all I do, and for which they have no similar duties.”

***Theme 3: Lack of resources and support.***

This was the third most frequent disadvantage for resident faculty and the most frequent for non-resident faculty of teaching at a branch campus. The expressions of this theme were described as a gap in services that are provided at the parent institution, fewer resources for research, lack of technical support, and a lack of monetary support. A resident faculty shared, “Limited access to campus resources such as writing center and teaching support”, and another stated, “There is a lack of access to the same resources but have higher expectations in teaching and advising.” A non-resident faculty shared, “There is a lack of support such as resources for technology and less security.” A final comment shared by resident faculty indicating gaps in services, “More difficult to access professional development opportunities (e.g., workshops) on parent campus.”

***Theme 4: Lack of collaborative opportunities.***

The theme of lack of collaborative opportunities was only shared by the resident faculty. Resident faculty expressed concern that there are very limited opportunities to collaborate with department faculty as well as interdisciplinary faculty. One faculty stated, “Limited ability to collaborate with colleagues from social work.” Another shared, “We do not have the same access to doctoral students as at the main campus, or to colleagues from other disciplines for collaborative research.” Finally, this faculty shared, “It's not as easy to collaborate when in residence at the branch campus due to fewer opportunities to

pop into a social work colleague's office to troubleshoot issues (research, service, and teaching).”

***Theme 5: Heavier workload.*** This theme emerged from the data more so from the resident faculty. Resident faculty described having a heavier workload including higher expectations of advising, mentoring and teaching, and the extra effort required to serve on parent campus committees for both the department and university. This resident faculty shared, “Student advising demands are higher given that a higher percentage of branch campus students seem to be first generation college students and require more directive guidance.” Another resident faculty commented, “It's not clear that parent campus colleagues fully appreciate the unique demands of being based on a regional campus (particularly related to advising and recruitment).”

***Theme 6: Travel.*** The theme of travel was expressed primarily by non-resident faculty. Travel and theme seven and eight all tied for the third most frequently expressed disadvantages for this group. Both resident and non-resident faculty expressed being required to travel to multiple campuses to teach, including the parent institution. The theme of travel was also taxing for the faculty and allowed less time to complete other faculty responsibilities. One non-resident stated, “Travel time reduces grading, class prep, and other time.”

***Theme 7: Students unmotivated and underprepared.*** The theme of unmotivated and underprepared students was cited as a significant disadvantage for non-resident faculty. This theme did not emerge for resident faculty. The descriptors for this theme included students being less prepared academically, more likely to be employed, having less time to study or read, and less

prepared for college level work after transferring from a community college. This non-resident faculty shared, “They are not prepared for college level work. Even after taking remediation support courses, they still are below level. Most are direct transfers for degree completion through a local community college.” Additional concerns raised was that branch campus students felt entitled to get A’s without doing the work and are unprofessional in the classroom. This resident faculty shared, “Students are more challenging, many expect a good grade but don’t feel they have to earn it.” One non-resident shared: “Students admitted to the branch campus are unprepared and hostile.” Another non-resident faculty member shared a similar thought, “They tend to complain more and some do not understand the concept of

professionalism at the level necessary for undergraduate social work students.”

**Theme 8: Lack of connection with students.** The last theme that emerged as a disadvantage was shared only by non-resident faculty. Non-resident faculty expressed a lack of connection with students. This theme ranked at about the middle of all themes and was described as not having enough face-to-face time with the students and not getting to know all the program students. One non-resident faculty member shared: “Not face-to-face with all students every week, students are sometimes less likely to contact main campus faculty and obviously, students can’t just drop in the faculty’s office on a daily basis.”

Table 2  
Disadvantages of teaching at a branch campus (n = 23)

	<i>Resident Faculty</i> <i>n (%)</i>	<i>Non-Resident Faculty</i> <i>n (%)</i>	<i>Total</i> <i>n (%)</i>
Isolation	18 (78.2%)	0 (0%)	18 (78.2%)
Lack of understanding by main (parent) campus	13 (52.1%)	0 (0%)	13 (52.1%)
Lack of resources and support	13 (52.1%)	7 (30.4%)	20 (86.9%)
Lack of collaborative opportunities	7 (30.4%)	0 (0%)	7 (30.4%)
Heavier workload	7 (30.4%)	2 (8.6%)	9 (39.1%)
Travel	1 (4.3%)	5 (21.7%)	6 (26%)
Students under motivated and underprepared	0 (0%)	5 (21.7%)	5 (21.7%)
Lack of connection with students	0 (0%)	5 (21.7%)	5 (21.7%)

**DISCUSSION**

This study uncovered a number of themes that were either shared by both resident and non-resident faculty or separate themes because of specific contexts unique to the different groups. Exploratory in nature, this study aimed to discover faculty perceptions of the advantages and disadvantages of

teaching at branch campuses. Further, the study sought you better understand the unique needs of faculty who teach at branch campuses. The advantages and challenges that emerged from the data can inform institutions with branch campuses of best practices in shaping branch campus culture. The following are two major themes present for both comparison groups (resident and

non-resident) and expressed in both categories (advantages and disadvantages): connection to students and recognition by the parent campus and autonomy and ownership that can serve better inform of social work professors considering a teaching assignment at a branch campus. Having a better understanding of the advantages and challenges faced by branch campus social work faculty can also benefit university administration by highlighting factors that best assist newer faculty transitioning into their new roles as instructors and advisors.

### **STUDENT CONNECTIONS**

Both resident and non-resident faculty expressed feeling a great sense of satisfaction with teaching branch campus students who were motivated, full of life experience, and belonging to an underserved student group. This sentiment was overwhelmingly expressed, by both faculty groups, as a major advantage of teaching at a branch campus. However, it is important to highlight that non-resident faculty expressed student motivation and preparedness as a concern and challenge. It appears non-resident faculty judgement on student motivation and preparedness arrives from comparing branch campus student to students from their primary teaching assignment at the parent campus. Some non-resident faculty expressed that branch campus students are not as prepared for college level course work as the students at the parent campus. Further, some non-resident campus faculty attributed branch campus students' lack of preparedness due to being transfer students from community colleges. It is important to consider that branch campus students are more likely to be commuting to campus from their home, older, balancing multiple responsibilities including work and care for families (Bozick

& DeLuca, 2005). The student that brings rich life experiences and diversity to the classroom also may have more demands on their time.

Interestingly, the resident faculty voiced having a deeper connection with the branch campus students than did the non-resident faculty. This may be attributed to the extended contact with students for resident faculty and having a reported sense of ownership of the program compared to non-resident faculty. Bird (2014) found that branch campus faculty had greater opportunities to be involved in efforts to affect change at the campus and in the community. As a result, for resident faculty members, the branch campus often offers more opportunities to work closely with students, in particular those students with non-traditional experiences. In addition, resident social work faculty are often the only faculty assigned at the branch campus and, therefore, serve as students' only advisor. Thus, they have the opportunity to develop a stronger sense of the students' personal and career trajectories.

### **RECOGNITION BY PARENT CAMPUS**

Resident faculty expressed that parent institution department faculty lacked an understanding of the workload involved in teaching at a branch campus. This workload included the increased need for advising, teaching, mentoring, and recruiting students as the only faculty member representing the social work department at the branch campus. In addition to the increased workload, faculty shared that they were solely responsible for this work versus their colleges at the parent institution. Nickerson and Schaefer (2001) also found a perception that branch campuses are less prestigious, and that resident faculty have a lesser workload compared to faculty at a parent

campus. Because of the smaller number of program students, some non-resident faculty might assume that the workload is lighter at a branch campus. Reinforcing this point, non-resident faculty did not highlight workload as a disadvantage of teaching at a branch campus.

In addition to a lack of understanding of the branch campus faculty workload, some resident faculty expressed a lack of opportunities for collaboration as an obstacle in achieving tenure track requirements. It was expressed exclusively by resident faculty that, although the expectations are the same in terms of research productivity, resident faculty have more teaching and mentoring demands as well as limited opportunities to connect with other researchers on scholarly projects. Branch campus faculty often reported feeling undervalued as a tenure track professor by the parent institution. Similarly, studies have shown that branch campus personnel have to contend with negative perceptions, imagined or real, that branch campuses hold a lesser status and enjoys fewer resources relative to the parent campus (McGrath, 2012; Merzer, 2008; Wolfe & Strange, 2003).

On the bright side, branch campus resident faculty alone voiced the value of being away from the department and university politics that they feel plagues the parent campus. In addition, resident faculty alone expressed enjoying the autonomy and associated ownership of the social work program at their branch campus. Having more freedom to shape and decide on elements of the program was a definite plus for resident faculty. It seems logical that non-resident faculty did not mention either advantage though both faculty groups enjoyed the smaller classroom setting and student cohort size. In contrast, resident faculty expressed

the disadvantage of isolation and lack of communication from the parent institution and other department faculty. This dichotomy speaks to the need to strive for a balance. In addition, both resident and non-resident faculty expressed a need for more resources and technical support. Laursen and Rocque (2006) found that faculty concerns that inhibit their effectiveness has the largest impact in reducing their job satisfaction.

### **FUTURE RESEARCH RECOMMENDATIONS**

As a field of study, branch campus faculty and student perceptions has not been explored to better understand best practices. More investigative research regarding faculty job satisfaction would better serve the needs of the campus, faculty and student. Although this study examines the feedback from faculty that may better inform the branch campus in developing a more satisfying work environment, there are additional factors that could be more significant. There is little research on the possible differentiation of tenure and promotion requirements for branch campus faculty. Although some universities have a different tenure and promotion structure for the branch campus faculty, there has been little investigation into these practices.

In addition, future research should also involve the direct feedback from college students who attend branch campuses to shed light on the qualities they identify as positive practices they experience attending a branch campus. Understanding that branch campus students encompass different characteristics than parent campus students, meeting the need of this student population is of particular importance. Examining different disciplines or multiple disciplines would add to the diversity of this much needed field of study.

## CONCLUSION

The university branch campus has emerged as a significant addition to the landscape of higher education. This development of branch campuses contributes to the goals of a growing number of institutions to extend postsecondary learning to students who may lack access to a post-secondary education. Despite the significant contributions of branch campuses in providing social work education, relatively little research has examined the experiences of branch campus faculty. Much of our understanding of academic life has long been dominated by selective observations of faculty in research-oriented flagship universities and highly competitive liberal arts colleges (Wolfe & Strange, 2003). A number of observations about the advantages of teaching at a branch campus stressed the value of this underserved group of students and for the most part, working in a supportive environment. The broader systemic problems identified by faculty teaching at a branch campus can inform institutions on tailoring policies, procedures and resources that can foster a supportive culture that values branch campus faculty. Assisting branch campus faculty in developing more collaborations with departmental faculty to foster a better understanding of the workload and ameliorate feelings of isolation can improve branch campus faculty job satisfaction. Institutions that develop a comprehensive menu of faculty developmental offerings can help to build a faculty who can weather challenges and offer creative solutions (Wolfe & Strange, 2003).

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## **Surveying the Landscape: Contemporary Challenges in Adult Higher Education**

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## Surveying the Landscape: Contemporary Challenges in Adult Higher Education

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### ABSTRACT

Colleges and universities have seen the unprecedented growth and formation of non-traditional adult education programs in the twenty-first century. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2016), enrollment by students age 25 and older reached 8.2 million in 2014 and is projected to reach 9 million by 2020. With the percentage increase of adult students age 25 and over predicted to be greater than that of students age under 25, a survey of the landscape of adult higher education and its respective challenges is timely (NCES, 2017b).

In an overview of the current challenges in adult higher education, a team of branch administrators share their theoretical insights and practical experience. Various trends coloring the context of adult higher education will be discussed first, including globalization, the information society, technology, and generational differences. In addition to these current trends, specific educational challenges will be discussed, particular to non-traditional learners, cultural issues, and online instruction. Also to be discussed will be cultural issues specific to the classroom, the challenges adult students face, followed by the challenges present in online education such as students' expectations, preparation, and retention.

*Keywords:* adult education, adult learners, university enrollment, cultural issues in the classroom, higher education

## INTRODUCTION

Colleges and universities have seen the unprecedented growth and formation of non-traditional adult education programs in the twenty-first century. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), enrollment by students age 25 and older reached 8.2 million in 2014 and is projected to reach 9 million by 2020 (NCES, 2016). Modalities have expanded to onsite, online, and hybrid formats. With the percentage increase of adult students age 25 and over predicted to be greater than that of students age under 25, a survey of the landscape of adult higher education and its respective challenges is warranted (NCES, 2017b). Andragogy, the study and method of teaching adult learners, is an important developing field of research.

The authors form a team of five deans and one director who serve as branch campus administrators, overseeing the non-traditional education of adult students in their respective regional campuses at a private, non-profit university in the Midwest. Various trends, coloring the context of adult higher education will be discussed, including globalization, the information society, technology, and generational differences. In addition to these current trends, specific educational challenges will be discussed, particularly, cultural issues and online instruction. Cultural issues specific to the classroom and the challenges adult students face will be presented next. Finally, the challenges present in online education such as students' expectations, preparation, and retention will be discussed.

What does adult education mean? Merriam and Brockett (2007) define adult education as “activities intentionally designed for the purpose of bringing about learning among

those whose age, social roles, or self-perception, define them as adults” (p. 8). The addition of the descriptor higher would then place those learning activities within the context of post-secondary institutions, typically colleges and universities. Consequently, Kasworm (2010) defines adult higher education as “formal and non-formal educational offerings beyond traditional secondary education targeted to adult learners” (para. 4). Bearing this in mind, what is the current context of adult higher education?

## THE CURRENT CONTEXT OF ADULT HIGHER EDUCATION

“No man ever steps into the same river twice, for it’s not the same river and he’s not the same man” is attributed to Heraclitus (n.d., para. 1), a Greek philosopher. In other words, the flowing water of the river constantly changes around the person as that individual also is constantly changing. Such is the case with adult higher education. The context of adult higher education is a constantly changing landscape and adult educators are constantly learning, growing, developing, and changing.

One factor influencing the landscape of adult higher education is the decrease in rates of enrollment. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2017a):

Overall participation in adult education among individuals age 16 or older increased from 40 percent in 1995 to 46 percent in 2001 and then declined to 44 percent in 2005. In 2005, among the various types of adult education activities, individuals age 16 or older participated most in work-related courses (27 percent), followed by personal interest courses

(21 percent), part-time college or university degree programs (5 percent), and other activities (3 percent). (para. 2)

Overall enrollment in higher education increased between 2005 and 2014 by 17 percent (NCES, 2017b), with enrollment peaking in the fall 2010, and then declining by 4 percent in the fall of 2014 (NCES, 2015). The National Center for Education Statistics (2017b) also noted “between fall 2004 and fall 2014, the percentage increase in the number of student enrolled in degree-granting institutions was higher for students under age 25 than for older students” (para. 3). As a result, many academic institutions offering programs designed for adult learners have seen a flattening or even a decrease in enrollment.

Kasworm (2010) indicates that current challenges in adult higher education have also been prompted by the global economy and the developments in information technology. Merriam and Bierema (2014) expand that list to four factors they consider important for understanding the current context of adult higher education: globalization, the information society, technology, and changing demographics. Merriam and Bierema contented that “the learning that adults are engaged in both reflects and responds to these forces” (p. 11).

## **GLOBALIZATION**

Globalization is “the movement of goods, services, people, and ideas across national borders” (Merriam & Bierema, 2014, p. 2). While it has been occurring for centuries, the speed at which it is occurring has exponentially quickened. Friedman (2011) says instead of a connected world it is a hyper-connected world. As a result, one

must remember that “in the 21st [*sic*] century, adult and continuing education in any one location exists as part of a broader, global endeavor” (Kasworm, Rose, & Ross-Gordon, 2010, p. 7).

Butucha (2015) identifies the implications of globalization on educational practice in adult higher education: adult learners must learn intercultural skills and understand the “interrelationships among international organizations, nation-states, public and private economic entities, sociocultural groups, and individuals across the globe” (Conclusion, para. 1) A dark side to the implications of globalization in adult higher education also exists. Cook and King (as cited in Sandmann, 2010) warn that “policymakers and academic leaders must strive to eliminate the effects of social stratification by income, gender, race, age, physical ability, or geographic location as barriers to adult education” (p. 228). However, “companies will locate where there is a workforce with the knowledge and educational system able to sustain and develop the business” (Merriam & Bierema, 2014, p. 3).

## **THE INFORMATION/KNOWLEDGE SOCIETY**

Increasing numbers of people have immediate access to information and events as they transpire. The U.S. Bureau of the Census (2012) reported that 71% of U.S. households had an available internet connection at home. Merriam and Bierema (2014) state that “increasingly, learners are turning to the World Wide Web, whether it is to immediately access information or take a course” (p. 190). “Data is growing faster than ever before and by the year 2020, about 1.7 megabytes of new information will be created every second for every

human being on the planet” (Marr, 2015, para. 3). While this has created more opportunities for just-in-time, self-directed learning for adults, “it can also be overwhelming, inaccurate, and misguided” (Merriam & Bierema, 2014, p. 191). The challenges of these massive amounts of information include dealing with information overload and learning to critically evaluate all the information (Bryan, 2013). In order “for information to become useful and meaningful, it needs to be weighed, organized, and structured into meaningful units of knowledge” (Merriam & Bierema, 2014, p. 4). Some of the key competencies required by this knowledge society are “deep understanding, flexibility, and the capacity to make creative connections” as well as “a range of so-called ‘soft skills’ including good team working” (Dumont & Istance, 2010, p. 20). So adult educators will need to assist adult learners in achieving these competencies.

The challenge is that there are places in the world that have not yet entered the knowledge society, and other places where “some groups of citizens, discriminated against because of gender, race or ethnicity, disability, or age, are marginalized in their own societies and prevented from meaningfully participating in the knowledge society” (Merriam & Bierema, 2014, p. 4). Adult educators will also need to be prepared to take on this challenge to help all adult learners be successful in the new information society.

## **TECHNOLOGY**

Technology has driven the development of the information society. Technology is also changing the way adults learn both formally and informally. Parker (2013) refers to “the technology infused lives of today’s learners” (p. 54) which not only shapes the context of

learning, but the learning itself. Unfortunately, according to Kasworm (2010), technology has also divided today’s workforce into two main groups: the first group “are those who lack technology skills and potentially other foundational knowledge and skills for the workforce” (para. 12). The second group are those “who are currently engaged in technology and view it as their primary access to both information and learning” (para. 13). However, with both groups, “because information is part of their world, they also expect rapid response and rapid learning that fits within their needs and interests” (para. 13). Adult educators must rise to the challenge of helping both groups achieve the competencies necessary to use the new technologies effectively.

Additionally, a growing expectation for academic institutions and instructors to use educational technology in their courses exists (Kyei-Blankson, Keengwe, & Blankson, 2009). Adult educators, therefore, must continue to learn the emerging technologies and their implications for educational practice. Some current examples include applications for mobile devices to track attendance in courses and others that allow for instant polling of class members in response to questions posed by the instructor.

## **GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES**

According to Lowery (2001), a generation is “a series of cohorts who share a common location in history and a common peer persona that reflects a collective identity” (p. 72). Lancaster and Stillman (2002) identify the following generations present in today’s workforce: (a) Traditionals (prior to 1945), (b) Baby Boomers (1946-1965), (c) Generation X (1965 to early 1980s), and (d) Millennials or Nexters (mid-1980s to 2000).

According to Hansman and Mott (2010), “adult educators should consider that—for the first time in history—four distinct generations at once may be present in the workplace and adult education learning environments, potentially posing challenges to effectively serve all adult learners in the same learning context” (p. 16). Adult educators must help bridge the gap between these generations in the classroom to allow for effective communication, collaboration, and learning. Given these generational differences among learners, here are some of the challenges faced by these four generations as students in the adult programs.

### **CHALLENGES FOR THE NON-TRADITIONAL LEARNER**

Adult learners face a set of challenges particular to their later stage of life. Since learning goals have been delayed, they may encounter additional barriers in feeling or being successful in their educational pursuit. In addition, they juggle additional responsibilities at this point in their lives as opposed to younger, traditionally-aged college freshmen.

Adult learners may be returning from school later in life due to immediate participation in the workforce, military, and/or in raising families after high school. With an understanding of these initial challenges adult learners may face, an opportunity to implement resources to assist in a successful transition back into education arises (Valentino, 2014). Some of the biggest challenges facing adult students include: (a) time constraints, (b) financial concerns, (c) lack of confidence (d) social anxiety, (e) lack of support systems, (f) technology challenges, and (g) fear of failure or that an age has been achieved that makes education

improbable (Valentino, 2014). In understanding these challenges, the educator can prepare the returning adult student for a clearer understanding of the expectations s/he should hold.

Adult learners can face the double-headed difficulty of juggling childcare and parent care simultaneously. The lack of time for the adult student beginning or resuming higher education while balancing work, family, and civic responsibilities needs to be considered. The educational locations that are strategically located close to students along with online, blended, and some part-time educational opportunities can make the time commitment seem more possible (Valentino, 2014). Adult students should be advised about the importance of balance with their personal commitments and the need to prioritize the time needed for studies. Time management and the ability to organize, as well as navigate through each course, is an important process that should be stressed from the beginning and in the very first class (Valentino, 2014).

Academic advisors and other university staff can support and reinforce the time management concerns with adult students as they begin their higher education journey. Multitudinous resources are available to guide academic advisors aid students. The National Academic Advising Association has a list of exactly such resources available for review at no charge (NACADA, 2017). In “Best Practices in Advising Nontraditional Learners,” for example, emphasis is placed on relationality with students, availability of nontraditional advising hours, and implementing strategies based on the latest statistics (NACADA, 2015).

Paying for higher education can be a challenge for many adult learners. Some may not work currently or do not have a plan in place to make payments. Student loans, grants, and scholarships are plentiful for students of all ages; however, adult students may find it hard to navigate through the financial aid and accounting processes in higher education. The need for academic advisors and financial aid personnel working in the university environment is invaluable as they counsel and lead students through their payment options for higher education (Valentino, 2014).

The confidence levels for adult students coming back to their education after many years are often lower due to the educational and technological advances since their previous school experience. This intensifies the fear of failure. If ten years or more have passed since an adult student has taken notes, studied for tests, collaborated in class group work, written papers, or worked with current technology programs, s/he may lack confidence in the ability to see the way forward (Valentino, 2014). Universities must provide adequate library assistance, tutors, writing, and technology support for adult students to gain the confidence needed to succeed as they re-enter. Adult students may not have the support system from family members because of the disruption it may cause (Valentino, 2014). The importance of adequate university academic support cannot be underestimated as essential for student success.

Adult learners also enter their studies with considerable benefits that younger students may not possess. Many students are concerned with fitting in as they return to the classroom or work online in discussions with their peers, yet the life experiences that they bring to the course room are invaluable. Most adult students hope not only to learn

but to bring value and make a difference in the educational environment as they choose to participate with other students. Adult students have diverse perspectives to be shared whether attending online or onsite (Valentino, 2014).

Along with previous classroom experience that adds value to their classes, adult students prefer to be involved in their instruction since they bring lifelong experience to their learning (Miroballi, 2010). Adults are more interested in relating their learning to professional or personal situations, and this learning tends to be problem-centered to meet a need or concern. Andragogy should be considered more in terms of teaching processes and skills needed for self-directed learning and inquiry which take place throughout adults' lives (Bear, 2012; Knowles, 1980). Knowles (2013) states that adult learners make a special contribution to improving organizational performance by applying directly to their occupation what they are learning. Instructors need to appreciate, respect, and understand the importance of, and need for, diverse teaching skills to reach such a broad learning spectrum in the classroom (Santos, 2012). With these andragogical insights, cultural acumen is additionally valuable to employ in non-traditional adult instruction.

## **CULTURAL ISSUES IN THE CLASSROOM**

An individual's character develops within social networks that influence one's beliefs, self-identity, and social structure (Sweeney & Fry, 2012). Kim (2001) theorized that as individuals incorporate cultural patterns into their psyches, their cultural identity is further developed. Cultural self-awareness, according to Gundling, Hogan and Cvitkovich (2011), is a first step in seeing



differences and realizing the importance of one's environment in shaping culturally how things are done. Cultural self-awareness also occurs through the exchange of questions that people ask one another (Gundling et al. 2011).

Schein (2010) defined culture as an abstraction which needs to build upon a more complex model concentrating upon observable events which include individual behavior, customs and rituals, mental models, and shared meanings. These elements often are within the setting of higher education and the classroom. Hammer, Bennett, and Wiseman (2003) referred to one's ability to experience cultural differences and interact in multi-culturally appropriate ways as possessing a sensitivity and respect toward those who are culturally different. Tan (2004) reported that among the skills that many people discuss, one's ability to adapt to different people from various cultures and to appreciate how the world interconnects is one of the most critical. Socialization, which occurs in higher education, involves various connections including student to student, and student to faculty. Olson and Kroeger (2001) raised the question about how individuals can enhance their intercultural communication skills for example, in order to educate a diverse and urban student population. Individuals whose backgrounds, religions, languages, and worldviews are diverse often form long lasting relationships.

## **CULTURE AND DEMOGRAPHICS**

When one studies the relationship between culture and higher education, an awareness of change that alters the landscape and, at times, the future of academia is realized. The current context of higher education includes an emerging change in the demographics of the student along with a

demand-response nature towards education (Eddy & VanDerLinden, 2006). Along with the change in demographics, multicultural companies are attracted to people who have transferable competencies that fit globally and who believe diversity is important in today's multicultural workplace (Trompenaars & Woolliams, 2009).

Alsubaie (2015) viewed the relationship between culture and education as being vital in its formation of academic communities and distinctive lifestyles. Students from diverse cultural backgrounds, religions, and norms learn to problem solve, role-play, and appreciate differences among one another through cooperative games and teacher attitudes (Alsubaie, 2015).

The relationship between culture and the adult student as a non-traditional learner includes specific themes that influence this growing segment. Otten (2003) advanced the idea that intercultural educational programs helped students to embrace diversity and demonstrate toleration without feelings of threat to their sense of cultural identity. Eagly and Chin (2010) theorized that cultural diversity provides context along dimensions of race, gender, ethnicity, and cultural variabilities. The challenge, therefore, is one of opportunity for adult students to engage with one another in an academic environment where a shared purpose exists for educational diversity and cultural engagement without feeling a sense of being devalued, and unappreciated by their peers or faculty.

## **DEMOGRAPHICS IN ADULT HIGHER EDUCATION**

The shift of demographics within the United States in the last twenty years can be a catalyst that also creates barriers for the adult student regarding educational satisfaction. The percentage of adults

gaining degrees has increased exponentially during the last several decades. Ryan and Bauman (2016) reported that the United States Census Bureau showed 5% of adults held a bachelor's degree or higher in 1940. By 2015, 33% of adults held a bachelor's degree (U. S. Census Bureau, 2015). The U.S. Census Bureau reported in 2007 that the U.S. population totaled 301.6 million people of whom 34% or 102.5 million were of minority status (Betts, Urias, & Betts, 2009). Minority representation within higher education included 35% of 18 million enrolled in 2008 (Betts et al., 2009). Chen (2017) argues that by 2044, the total percentage of minorities in the U.S. will exceed the population of Caucasians and with a total undergraduate population expected to increase by nearly 37% by the year 2022.

The U.S. Department of Education classifies non-traditional students as dependent and independent in their National Center for Educational Statistics report (NCES, 2015). Independent non-traditional students are those who are 24 years of age or older, married students who are under 24 years of age with dependents, veterans, active duty, orphans, homeless, risk of being homeless, or wards of the court. The data below represents non-traditional students during the 2011-2012 academic year who NCES classified as independent (NCES, 2015). Males were 43.6%, while females represented 55% (NCES, 2015). The ethnicity and race of this group was 48.8% Caucasian, 64.5% African-American, 50.3% Hispanic, 41.1% Asian, and 51.5% other (NCES, 2015). Non-traditional students who attended a public two-year institution was 59.7%. 35.6% attended a public four-year institution; 32.7% attended a private, non-profit four-year institution (NCES, 2015). 87% attended a for-profit four-year institution; 71.4% attended a for-profit less

than two years, and 52.6% attended more than one institution (NCES, 2015).

Between 1988 and 2015, educational attainment increased for Hispanics, African-Americans, and Asians (Ryan & Bauman, 2016). In 2013, approximately 17.5 million undergraduates studied in the United States, comprised of 56.6% Caucasian, 16.4% Hispanic, 14.3% African-American, 6.1% Asian/Pacific Islander, and 0.85% Native American/Alaskan Native (Chen, 2017). Regarding college completion among men and women, men have historically held a higher percentage of bachelor degree completions than have women, yet that gap has narrowed in the past few decades (Ryan & Bauman, 2016). By 2015, the percentage of men age 25 and older with a bachelor's degree or higher was almost statistically even with women whose rate was at 33%, while men were rated slightly lower at 32% (Ryan & Bauman, 2016). The data above provides evidence that the demographics for adults in higher education are diverse in a variety of categories, and this diversity creates challenges in the classroom, not only for the student, but also for faculty.

### **CULTURAL CHALLENGES FOR ADULT STUDENTS IN THE CLASSROOM**

As has been mentioned above, technological challenges and anxieties about one's own ability to be successful are particularly present among the adult student population. Brustein (2007) suggests the additional challenge of effective communication among adult students, especially those situations in which cultural and language boundaries occur.

**Language.** One of the barriers that the adult student may face in the classroom involves language differences as a diverse student

population increases. Stone (2006) includes verbal communication style as one of the key dimensions of cultural differences in multicultural higher education. Livermore (2016) discusses as overwhelming the difficulty of an individual thinking of ideas while expressing them in a different language. Language differences can affect perceptions of adult students toward the educational process in terms of faculty appearing not to listen or to engage with specific students (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011). Anderson (2008) theorizes that when faculty have not engaged in regular diversity discussions with academic colleagues, it does not become a priority for their classroom, and no investment is made to influence collaboration with diverse populations of adult students.

#### **Lack of Cultural Sensitivity and Biases.**

Another challenge that many adult students encounter involves a lack of cultural sensitivity by academy stakeholders. This can occur from the faculty, administrators, and other students. Chen (2017) writes that non-traditional students returning to school are, at times, considered to be charity cases who remain invisible within the student population. The danger of this lies in the probability that the student's academic progress is stifled and the student patronized. Williams (2005) offers that cultural communication differences call for intercultural sensitivity and emotional resilience and are essential for the intercultural student to manage the stressors and uncertainties of academic life.

#### **CHALLENGES PARTICULAR TO ONLINE EDUCATION**

Courses delivered online to the college student have quickly become an important means of reaching that population. While colleges and universities have faced a

decrease in enrollment overall, online enrollment continues to comprise an increasingly larger percentage share (Straumsheim, 2017). In 2012, 32% of all students had taken at least one online course (Allen & Seaman, 2013, p. 4). For a non-traditional adult, frequently with work and family responsibilities, attending a traditional, semester-based and in-seat university is often cost and time-prohibitive. "For this group of students, asynchronous online learning can be a godsend" (McPherson & Bacow, 2015, p. 149). To accommodate this growing body of learners, colleges and universities must consider this group of students and its instructors through a slightly different lens. As a subset of adult higher education, online learning has its own challenges pertaining to expectations, preparation, retention, and engagement.

#### **STUDENTS' EXPECTATIONS**

The non-traditional student is described as "being independent for financial aid purposes, having one or more dependents, being a single caregiver, not having a traditional high school diploma, delaying postsecondary enrollment, attending school part time, and being employed full time" (Radford, Cominole, & Skomsvold, 2015, p. 1). If one ponders these characteristics, distinct stressors become evident: financial responsibility, (single) parent, older, part-time student, and full-time employee. Thus, students entering into online courses have the already overwhelming challenges of being an adult student, but they are also doing so in a sterile online environment isolated from their peers. When online, students miss out on conversations during breaks. They cannot easily obtain clarification from an instructor while discussing an assignment. All too often, they are not able to form bonds with other

students which come from sitting next to someone for weeks on end.

As a result, administrators of online programs must understand what online students expect from their time in an online course. To frame this further, consider four categories of expectations from an online student's vantage point: (a) of the actual student (self-expectations), (b) of the other students, (c) of the faculty, and (d) of the institution.

An individual student often has unstated expectations of how they will perform academically. Many adults are driven to prove that they are capable of doing well for intrinsic purposes or to set an example for family members. Their desire to obtain a 4.0 GPA can often cloud their actual learning; instead of considering the journey (learning) they are overly focused on the destination (grades). Instructors and administrators alike must consider this and not be too dismissive of their grading concerns. On the other extreme, some students set their sights on the degree itself and have little motivation for the material. Consider this student when designing curricula. How best can the course content motivate both the overachiever and the lackadaisical learner? How do the students' expectations factor into the overall course design?

With regard to curricular design, what happens when group work is incorporated and intermingled with these students? Such a circumstance often reveals disparity in what students expect from their classmates. In the aforementioned example, the driven student resents the casual student's adherence to standards and timelines. This same relaxed student cannot understand the demands of the ambitious peer. A wise instructor or administrator will establish clear guidelines among students of what one

another can and should expect from peer relationships.

Guiding students to reasonable expectations of themselves and other students is wise, but it must be matched to establishing—and following—clear expectancies of the instructor's behavior. If a student expects instantaneous responses from faculty and the instructor believes a 48-hour response window is acceptable, conflict and disappointment will occur. Likewise, if an instructor assumes adherence to a specific writing standard (or discussion responsiveness, etc.) but does not communicate that standard, conflict will occur. Online students only know what they have been told or what they have previously experienced. If the course content is important enough to define its terms and definitions, would it not be prudent to also establish common expectations of the faculty's role in the learning?

Most often overlooked is the clarification of students' expectations by the institution itself. It is important to discern the level of communication an online student desires. On important matters, what form should those communications take (email, social media, and/or postal mail)? Conducting surveys or focus groups are helpful to determine if students believe they will have access to courses, technical support, advisers, and tutors. In what format and at what times do they desire these? It should be assessed how convenient it is for students to access financial aid, account balances, and textbook information. When something goes wrong, how easy is it for a student to contact the correct person on their *first* attempt? Lastly, the institution's application and enrollment process should be evaluated for alignment, for continuity between the applicant and student stages. A set-up for failure is to promise, whether explicitly or

by insinuation, one thing and then deliver another. That one sets and aligns students' expectations for themselves, one another, faculty, and the operational team(s) is imperative. This can help to reduce anxiety, promote transparency, and increase the likelihood of success.

## **STUDENTS' PREPARATION**

One of the greatest institutional advantages of online courses and programs is the ability to draw students from a larger geographical footprint. Depending upon the institution, that could extend the reach another hundred miles or to those around the world. Such an influx of students outside of the institution's normal pool adds a rich diversity of learners with regard to "social, religious, ethnic, and geographical backgrounds" (Pucciarelli & Kaplan, 2016, p. 315). This same diversity may present challenges as well. No longer can an institution understand and plan for its typical student by way of demographics, perspective, and culture. Academic preparedness may vary greatly between students. The academic strength of school systems, attentiveness in class, and time since high school are just some of the factors. Additionally, English may be a second language for some learners. Depending upon an institution's geographic reach, one may also find that students can no longer pop onto campus for assistance, encouragement, or problem resolution. In addition, some may be living in another time zone. How does these considerations impact the organization's support model?

Another item that contributes to students' preparation but is not often considered is their previous experience in higher education. For many adult students, college-level classes occur over time and with more than one institution. Given the wide net that online courses cast, students may have

attended local, regional, and (inter)national schools. These past experiences will invariably frame their expectations of how an online course should work and how faculty should interact. How their calendar was planned (according to a semester timeline or a non-term, rolling one) and how they previously acquired their textbooks, and in what format (new, used, or rentals) will impact their current understanding and expectations. Consider then how the institution addresses each of these issues and how it communicates the expectations, policies, and processes surrounding them. If the strategy is to send students to the fine print in a student manual, it may add detrimentally to the final challenge mentioned here: student persistence.

## **STUDENT RETENTION**

Retaining students is an oft-mentioned challenge regarding adult students, let alone online learners (Croese, 2015; Sutton, 2014). The key differential proposed here is separating factors into two distinct groups: independent variables and dependent variables. The former consists of those items for students that are relatively untouchable by the institution: familial needs, financial requirements, workplace stressors, and so on. Though efforts in this pool is noble, it is often with little return. A college or university might establish childcare options, for instance, but if it is not convenient or affordable, it was only a good idea, not a good solution. Dependent variables, of course, are those that the institution can influence. Such factors include curriculum design, office hours, learning management system features and layout, requirements of instructors, accessibility of information (regarding accounting, financial aid, textbook, etc.), explanation of expectations, and knowing who the institution's students are and why they are at the institution. These

factors should be within the control of an intentional higher education administrator.

In summary, if one seeks to address challenges faced by the adult student population, especially those online, one must ask how much is really known about each of the factors above: expectations, preparedness, and retention. Better yet, ask those who interact with the institution's online adult students. If they are unclear, that may be just the place in which to begin. The institution and *all* employees must understand *who* their student is, *why* they enrolled, and *what* each student expects.

## CONCLUSION

Change is inevitable and inevitably brings challenges. However, our responsibility as educators is to, through practice, critical evaluation, research, and collaboration, pursue addressing the needs of adult learners (Hansman & Mott, 2010). In responding to contemporary challenges of globalization, the information society, and technology, Kasworm (2010) reminds us that the task is to prepare adults to utilize their education and skills to innovate new knowledge and products for the good of society. With due attention to the specific needs of adult learners to provide adequate university support, cultural considerations, and modes of instructional delivery, educators, following Young (2017), can improve the quality of education provided to this important constituency.

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