# EDUCATING ADULT LEARNER AND NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS: PRINCIPLES AND TECHNIQUES FOR ENSURING SUCCESS

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## ABSTRACT

Adult learners form an important segment of the college student population, and recent trends point to increased growth in this sector. Programs have been designed to meet the needs of adult non-traditional students, although the focus of many have been on administrative and student service-oriented aspects and considerations. However, one area which has been addressed in less depth, but it critical, is how to improve adult learner academic success using both pedagogical and scheduling-oriented methods and techniques. These include the use of such methods as accelerated and intensive schedules, course blocked scheduling, and also facilitating student interaction outside of class through the use of distance learning. The use and application of these various methods to help improve, and ensure the success of adult learners enduring the rigors of their programs are explored. This includes a discussion of pedagogical techniques, the use of distance/online learning, the dynamics of student/faculty relationships and interaction, and also the specific challenges and opportunities inherent in these kinds of approaches. Examples from the Fairleigh Dickinson University Global Business Management program are discussed, together with broader recommendations as to several key approaches which can help to ensure adult student success.

# INTRODUCTION

Adult learners are becoming an important segment and component of the educational population and market. While the "traditional" college student who attends college after high school and pursues an education towards the goal of a position and career still is considered the main focus of post-secondary student recruiting, an emerging and growing segment of the potential student market has emerged, that of the adult learner. Adult learners are generally older, may have considerable working experience, and may also have family and other non-work related responsibilities. Because of their age, knowledge, and experience, adult learners have different orientations and emphases than students who have just completed high school (NCES, 2002).

Adult learners are also frequently referred to as nontraditional students. Other characteristics of non-traditional students include a greater percentage of part-time enrollment, delayed enrollment past one's high school graduation, working full-time, is financially independent from parents, and is more likely to have dependents aside from a spouse. (NCES, 2002). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2002), 73% of college students can be considered to be nontraditional students. In addition, 50% of all college students are 25 years or older, and this number has increased 50% over the past two decades and is continuing to grow larger (Horn, 1996; Nordstrom, 1997; Choy, 2002).

Because adult learners have different characteristics from that of the traditional college students, specialized programs have been developed to address the specific needs of this student segment. There is considerable variance in the way that these programs are conducted, with many putting greater emphasis on administrative options (payment, flexibility options, student services, etc.) as opposed to pedagogical and learning-oriented considerations. For instance, the scheduling of classes during evenings and weekend, with shortened semesters are examples of administrative approaches to adult learner programs. The driving force behind many of these programs is the desire to capture a segment of the non-traditional adult student market, which in turn will help to improve enrollments and revenue for the college or university (Singh and Martin, 2004).

In order to best meet the needs of adult learners, it is necessary to go beyond the use of administrative and student service perspectives, to look more at the ways to help ensure the success of adult students who want to pursue an academic program. As mentioned in previous literature, adult learners want more practical, career-applicable courses and programs, and also have to balance the needs of work, family, and related obligations. They have time constraints, which generally relate to a need and desire to finish a course and degree without an extended delay, while at the same time attending classes during non-work hours, such as evenings and weekends.

Clearly, the adult learner population and market is one which clearly has a need for the use of varied and focused pedagogical approaches. The purpose and objective of this paper therefore is, first, to examine what exactly an adult learner is, and also to review some of the background related to adult learners. From here, the focus is on what pedagogical and other techniques and methods would be appropriate to best meet the needs of adult learners. A discussion of the methods and techniques are discussed in the context of an actual adult learner program being run at Fairleigh Dickinson University, known as the Global Business Management (GBM) program.

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