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Involvement, Development, and Retention

Theoretical Foundations and Potential Extensions for Adult Community College Students

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The aim of this article is to orient those interested in adult community college student research to a wide array of discourses and theoretical tools that can help us understand the underlying complexity of the problems faced by this often-marginalized group. Reviewed are categories of theory about student involvement and engagement, student development, and adult learning that should inform how we educate adult community college students. This article concludes with a discussion of how all these theories, taken together, can improve adult education in community colleges.

Keywords: *adult learning; student retention; identity development; relational learning; experiential learning*

Many adult students—defined here as students 24 or older—attending community college for the first time are inadequately prepared, both academically and socially, for college-level learning (Howell, 2001). As a consequence, many of these students do not persist, and thus community colleges experience high levels of student attrition. This situation is an especially important challenge for adult educators in light of the fact that 43% of all community college students are older than the age of 24 (U.S. Department of Education, 2005). We must have a basic understanding about the importance of academic and social integration on campus for all college students; adult students are no exception. In addition, defining what can constitute involvement activities for college

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students in the classroom, in particular, is crucial for establishing a legitimate space for operationalizing curricula that are appropriate for adult students.

For many years, scholars and practitioners have worked to develop retention strategies for other types of community college students, including first-generation, minority, and underprepared students. However, few have examined adult student retention in a comprehensive way, taking into account the myriad sociological, biological, and psychological changes that occur as one grows older (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). Indeed, as Ryan (2003) has argued, adult community college students face unique challenges and require new forms of academic and institutional support.

The vast majority of research on student retention has been situated in 4-year institutions of higher education that typically enroll White, residential, and traditional-age students (Crawford, 1999; Rendón, 1994). Furthermore, adult students are frequently ignored in scholarship pertaining to community college retention. To better understand this large and growing group of community college students, educators must begin to look at existing literature on adult learners in relation to theories of student development and retention. In doing so, we can begin to understand more about the unique problems adult students face related to identity development, students' sense of mattering and validation, gender differentiation, and the central effects of one's cultural background. These factors ultimately coalesce to influence, positively or negatively, an adult student's ability to persist in college and reach his or her educational goals. In this article, I discuss several theories that can inform the way we educate adults in community colleges. Reviewed are categories of theory about student involvement and engagement, student development, and adult learning that should inform how we educate adult community college students. The article concludes with a discussion of how all these theories, taken together, can improve adult education in community colleges.

First, as Sanford (1966) pointed out, it is essential to consider adult students' level of precollege readiness, challenges in college, and the support mechanisms necessary for academic success. Next, to preempt the sense of marginalization that many adult students experience during the early stages of college, administrators and adult educators must recognize that adults' presence and contributions actually matter to the institution's success (Schlossberg, 1989). Third, as Rendón (1994) has shown, one of

the best ways to accord a sense of mattering to adult students is through active forms of validation, both within and outside the classroom.

A fourth underlying support and developmental construct is Chickering's (1969) work on the seven vectors of higher level identity development; many of these stages are also applicable to adult students. In general, it is essential that adult educators recognize that their students are developing personally, intellectually, emotionally, and socially. Finally, given that the majority of adult community college students are women, understanding that women tend to experience learning in a more relational way (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986) lends support to the use of student-peer or relational learning models in the classroom.

As Knowles (1984) argued, adult students can operate as self-directed learners, use their experiences as a reservoir of knowledge, and seek to immediately apply new knowledge and skills. Kolb (1984) added that adults create new knowledge through the transformation of experience. Although Knowles argued for self-directed learning and incorporating old knowledge and experiences, and Kolb asserted that learning in community actually facilitates the creation of new experiences and new knowledge, the two constructs—taken together—can greatly inform how community college educators design curricula and classroom activities for adult students. The overarching purpose of all these theories is to achieve transfer of classroom learning, the immediate application of that learning, and greater adult student retention. The aim of this article is to orient those interested in adult community college student research to a wider array of discourses and theoretical tools that can help us understand the underlying complexity of the problems faced by this often-marginalized group. In the pages that follow, each of these theories is discussed in more detail and ways are suggested that, taken together, can improve adult education in community colleges.

The Heart of the Matter: Student Engagement

Academic success in college has been positively associated with classroom engagement, as well as other forms of involvement in college. Tinto's (1993) interactionalist theory serves to highlight the value of a classroom experience in which students and their teachers can achieve intellectual synergy. Astin (1984), on the other hand, described involvement more generally, both inside and outside the classroom.

Tinto's Interactionalist Theory

Tinto's (1993) interactionalist theory of student persistence and retention assumes that individuals arrive at college with differing family backgrounds, socioeconomic statuses, levels of academic preparation, and unique skills and abilities. Students also bring a certain level of commitment to the goal of succeeding academically. According to Tinto (1975), this level of commitment is either bolstered or diminished, depending on how well a student becomes academically and socially integrated on campus. Put simply, Tinto's (1987) interactionalist theory rests on the idea that students and their institutions continually interact through social and educational communities and that "persistence is contingent on the extent to which students [are] incorporated into" these environments (Rendón, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000, p. 128). For Tinto (1987), student persistence "hinges on the construction of educational communities in college, program, and classroom levels which integrate students into the ongoing social and intellectual life of the institution" (p. 188).

Tinto (1987) noted, however, that urban community colleges that serve large numbers of working students may face several challenges in integrating students into the institution. In particular, because most adult community college students commute to campus, classroom experiences may be the only thing they share with faculty and peers. For adult students, therefore, all academic and social integration must take place in the community college classroom. Indeed, Tinto (1997) argued that the classroom must serve as a smaller social and intellectual meeting place where faculty and students can interact. As he wrote, "Engagement in the community of the classroom can become a gateway for subsequent student involvement in the academic and social communities of the college generally" (p. 82).

But what does effective and appropriate classroom involvement for adults look like? Kolb (1984) argued that experiential teaching and learning methods that incorporate concrete experiences, reflective observations, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation can help to enrich classroom experiences for adult learners. In particular, experiential learning models offer relevant frameworks that allow adult learners to couple abstract learning objectives with real-world contexts. In other words, these models leverage students' real-world experiences to connect classroom concepts and discourse with students' prior knowledge and understanding of the world. This approach may, in turn, positively affect their persistence and success rates.

Astin's Involvement Theory

Astin (1984) defined involvement as "the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience" (p. 134). He posited five general categories of involvement: academic involvement; faculty involvement; involvement with peers; involvement in work; and involvement elsewhere, which includes watching television, commuting, or attending religious services. According to Astin, faculty-student involvement is the most important category, as instructors have the greatest ability to influence what students actually accomplish. As Astin pointed out, however, faculty-student interaction has historically been minimal in community colleges, which is one potential explanation for low levels of student persistence and retention at those institutions.

Astin (1984) believes that involvement has both qualitative (level of commitment) and quantitative (time devoted) components, that student learning and development are proportional to the quantity and quality of student involvement, and that the effectiveness of any educational policy or program is correlated to that program's ability to increase the level of student involvement. Theoretically, these general ideas can all be translated to research on adult student involvement in community colleges. However, much of Astin's work on student involvement has primarily focused on traditional-age, residential students attending 4-year colleges and universities. He has not addressed what involvement may mean for adult community college students who generally commute to campus, work at least part-time, and have significant family responsibilities. Thus, more research is needed to couple Astin's model of student involvement with research on adult students, as well as curricular frameworks and theories about ways community colleges can support their adult student populations and increase persistence and retention rates.

Theories for Institutional and Social Support of Adult Students

Many of the theoretical constructs that address institutional and social support structures for traditional-age students have crossover value for adult students. Theories such as those developed by Sanford (1966), Schlossberg (1989), Rendón (1994), Chickering (1969), and Belenky et al. (1986) all reflect how adult students negotiate the academic and social

landscape at community colleges and suggest a need to understand better how colleges can support these students. Each of these theories is discussed in the following sections.

Sanford's Person-Environment Theory

Sanford (1966) was a pioneer in advancing the notion that student development services must be designed for—and characterized as—a person-environment interactional experience. He explained his theory by introducing three general concepts: *readiness, challenge*, and *support*. Sanford suggested that, for an individual to demonstrate academic and social competency, she or he must be ready to do so and that this readiness must come from either personal maturity or the right environmental conditions. Implicit in his concept is the idea that a social compact between students, faculty, and the institution must be in effect to create an environment whereby the student commits to learning new things and whereby the college provides the appropriate developmental support mechanisms—learning assistance centers, for example—for academic success.

Sanford (1966) further asserted that the amount of challenge a person can undertake is largely dependent on the quality of appropriate *support* an institution provides. If a person faces too little challenge in academic coursework, he or she may become complacent and experience no real benefits to his or her personal or professional development. However, if students are challenged by their coursework, they will either regress to earlier forms of less adaptive behavior, step up to the challenge and change their behavior, or escape or ignore the challenge altogether. By providing effective institutional and social supports, community colleges can help adult students step up to the challenge and succeed in their learning.

For example, Crawford (1999) found that students were more successful in courses that included topics positively correlated to persistence, including memory techniques, time management, tips on managing overload anxiety, and assistance with test taking and required course papers. Whereas he did not specifically address the academic challenges encountered by adult students who typically work at least part-time or who have not attended school for a number of years, Sanford's theory of readiness, challenge, and support is, it seems to me, applicable to many adult students, and further research that extends the theory to adults would be beneficial.

Schlossberg's Theory of Marginality and Mattering

Like Sanford's (1966) theory, Schlossberg's (1989) concepts of *marginality* and *mattering* shed light on the effects institutional support services can have on a student's commitment to persist in college. Schlossberg defined marginality as "a sense of not fitting in" (p. 5). Feelings of marginality can heighten students' feelings of irritability or depression and can create unhealthy levels of self-consciousness when encountering new environments or taking on new roles and their accompanying expectations. Adult students, in particular, may feel a sense of alienation or marginality on college campuses that serve largely traditional-age students (Tinto, 1975).

In contrast to marginality, Schlossberg (1989) defined mattering as "our belief, right or wrong, that we matter to someone else" (p. 5). She identified four dimensions to mattering: attention (a student feels noticed), importance (a student feels cared about), ego extension (a student feels that others will be proud of his or her accomplishments and sympathize with his or her failures), and dependence (a student feels needed). According to Schlossberg, students must feel as though they actually matter to the institution before they can feel capable of initiating involvement in academic and social activities that ultimately lead to higher levels of persistence.

To diminish adult community college students' feelings of marginality and enhance their sense of mattering, community college student support services should include eight functions:

- specialized services adapted for adult needs;
- information about and opportunities to develop skills related to adult development, transitions, and the college experience;
- advocacy for adult students;
- a clearinghouse for campus services and resources;
- referrals to adult student resources, both in the institution and in the greater community; and
- adult student support groups, networking, mentoring, and counseling, including outreach and peer support (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998).

Rendón's Theory of Validation

Like Schlossberg's (1989) concept of mattering, Rendón (1994) defined *validation* as "an enabling, confirming and supportive process

initiated by in-and out-of class agents that foster academic and interpersonal development" (p. 46). Simply stated, Rendón believed that active forms of validation must be provided to nontraditional students to encourage their continued involvement in college life. Validation, as Rendón defined it, can occur within classrooms and within campus organizations.

Validation must begin in the early stages of a student's academic program, ideally through instructors and student peer engagement (Rendón, 1994). Validation can help students develop confidence in their learning ability, gain a heightened sense of self-worth, and hold a belief that they actually have something to offer the academic community at large. Although Rendón (1994) did not specifically address adult students in her theory of validation, it is clear from my experiences that adult students must feel validated, especially during the early stages of their academic career, as they are "often first-generation college students experiencing many doubts about their ability to succeed" (Evans et al., 1998, p. 28). Extending the idea of student validation to adult students, however, means that the knowledge and experience they bring into the classroom must be used as a learning resource and validated via the curriculum. Connecting course assignments to workplace requirements also helps to validate adult students' personal sense of identity and occupational role.

Chickering's Theory of Identity Development

Chickering's (1969) seven vectors of identity development in college include the following: *developing competence*, whereby students produce intellectual, physical, and interpersonal competence; *managing emotions*, whereby students learn to recognize, express, and control their emotions; *movement through autonomy toward interdependence*, which Evans et al. (1998) described as "freedom from continual and pressing needs for reassurance, affection, or approval from others" (p. 39); *development of mature interpersonal relationships*, which refers to interpersonal and intercultural relationships that contribute immensely to a student's sense of self; *establishing identity*, which refers primarily to a student's age, culture, and gender; *developing purpose*, which occurs when students develop clear vocational goals and persist in their completion; and, finally, *developing integrity*, which refers to the development of humanitarian and personalizing values, as well as achieving congruence so that "self interest is balanced by a sense of social responsibility" (Evans et al., 1998, p. 40).

Although Chickering's (1969) seven vectors were created to explain the various psychosocial developments that occur during the traditional-age student's college years, Wimbish, Bumphus, and Helfgot (1995) asserted that the theory is also applicable to adult students and can indeed inform adult student development practice. For example, "adult students may work through Chickering's seven vectors and reexamine their identity in the context of going to college" (Wimbish et al., 1995, p. 24). In addition, for many adult students, exposure to global cultures on campus contributes to their sense of self and their relation to the wider global community. As well, it is crucial for adult students to develop purpose about their vocational goals, especially in community or technical colleges. These goals are often strongly tied to family commitments and financial survival and can and should be worked into curricula at community colleges that serve large numbers of adult students. However, researchers investigating the applicability of Chickering's theory to women have found that "their development differs from men's, particularly regarding the importance of interpersonal relationships in fostering other aspects of development" (Evans et al., 1998, p. 46). As such, we must also take into account theories about women's ways of knowing if we are to serve adult students effectively.

Belenky et al.'s Theory of Women's Ways of Knowing

Belenky et al. (1986) argued that when women experience *subjective knowledge*, they begin to rely on personal and professional ontologies—or nature of experience—as a source of knowledge. In addition, when women begin to experience learning as *connected knowers*, they "display trust and patience towards others in the process of knowing" and rely on "truth emerging in the context of personal experience and being grounded in empathy and care" (Evans et al., 1998, p. 149). Belenky et al., as well as other feminist scholars such as Gilligan (1995), believe that women learn in relational and caring ways. Indeed, Evans et al. (1998) stated that "the care voice is derived from a conception of the self that is relational and a view of self and others as connected and interdependent" (p. 191).

Given that, in 2000, women comprised 58% of the student body at community colleges, it is important that community college educators consider women's ways of knowing and learning when constructing classroom experiences and college support systems (Phillippe, 2000; White, 2001). In particular, curricular models that validate a student's

personal experience in classroom discourse are especially effective for adult students. Belenky et al.'s (1986) work, for example, highlighted the importance of using learning community models that foster student-peer engagement to help women learn in ways that come more naturally to them, rather than in ways that may work better for men.

Major Curricular Theories for Adult Students

The theories described in the preceding section can guide community college educators in creating institutional supports that can be effective in retaining adult learners. The following theoretical constructs relate to adult learning models and couple two major curricular recipes that are important to adult students. One validates and uses students' personal and professional experiences as a learning resource in the classroom, creates self-directed learners, and argues for immediate application of learned knowledge and skills (Knowles, 1984). The second construct creates a learning environment in which students' beliefs, ideas, and new experiences are used to create new knowledge (Kolb, 1984). Taken together, these theories for designing curricula allow adult students to understand what they already know more deeply and, more important, learn what new knowledge they have yet to learn.

Knowles's Theory of Andragogy

Knowles (1984) posited that adult learners are intrinsically, rather than externally, motivated to succeed in higher education. As such, adult educators should take a more egalitarian approach to choosing subject matter and determining how it is taught (Howell, 2001). In particular, educators must shift from a pedagogical approach to one described as *andragogical*. Knowles defined andragogy as "the art and science of helping adults learn, in contrast to pedagogy which is the art and science of teaching children" (p. 43). Androgogical approaches to learning are "based on the learners' needs and interests so as to create opportunities for the learners to analyze their experience and its application to their work and life" (Sims & Sims, 1995, p. 3).

According to Knowles (1984), "adult learners . . . demand that the relevance and application of ideas be demonstrated and tested against their own accumulated experience and wisdom. . . . For these adults, learning

methods that combine work and study, theory and practice, provide a more familiar and therefore more productive arena for learning" (p. 6). Thus, when designing curricula for adult community college students, faculty must concentrate on the following:

- enabling an adult student to transition from dependent to independent, self-directed learning;
- drawing upon a growing reservoir of student experience as a learning tool;
- understanding adults' readiness to learn based on actual social roles;
- recognizing adults' need to apply new knowledge and skills immediately; and
- understanding that adult learners are internally, rather than externally, motivated.

As Kerwin (1981) pointed out, andragogy can be utilized in community colleges to achieve adult students' participation in their own learning and, consequently, can enable an active form of involvement, especially in vocational training programs. However, more research on how andragogy can work in the community college setting is needed.

Kolb's Theory of Experiential Learning and Adults

Like Knowles's (1984) theory of andragogy, experiential learning—defined as "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (Kolb, 1984, p. 41)—is especially useful in educating adult students (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). Experiential learning assumes that learning is a process, not an outcome; that learning is best facilitated when students apply their own beliefs and ideas to a topic; that learning involves feeling, thinking, perceiving, and behaving; and, finally, that learning is the process of creating knowledge.

Kolb's (1984) experiential learning model connects two dialectically related modes of learning: engaging experiences and transformative experiences. He promoted classroom activities that include concrete experiences (for example, article discussions), reflective observations (such as brainstorming), abstract conceptualizations (hypothesizing, for example), and active experimentation (such as case studies).

Knox (1980) complemented the work of Knowles (1984) and Kolb (1984) by focusing on adult students' sense of discrepancy between their current role, knowledge, skills, or attitudes and their desired proficiency levels in these areas. According to Knox, "understanding discrepancies

between current and desired levels of proficiencies helps to explain motives of adult learners and enables those who help adults learn to do so responsively and effectively" (p. 16).

Implications for Community College Research and Practice

If the goal of adult educators is to achieve better retention through more effective transfer of learning and its subsequent real-world application in students' lives, then we have a long way to go. Miller, Pope, and Steinmann (2005) recently found that both traditional-age and adult community college students are fairly uninvolved on campus, as measured by their use of on-campus computing resources and their participation in athletic events, eating on campus, rest and relaxation on campus, campus athletic resources, dates on campus, social clubs, and cultural events. Given the myriad out-of-class commitments adult community college students have, we can assume that they are even less involved, at least by this definition. But what does effective and appropriate involvement look like for adult community college students? What are the appropriate social and academic support variables necessary for adult community college students? And what curricular methods can connect old experience and knowledge with current learning objectives to create new experiences and knowledge that are relevant and applicable to adult students' everyday lives?

For adult students who work at least part-time and whose only faculty and peer interaction is in the classroom, a radical redesign of curricula offered to adult students is necessary. These new curricula should be at least partly self-directed, which allows adult students to be self-starters when not on campus or in the classroom. Inside the classroom, it is essential to affirm and validate adult students' experiences, highlighting the social and academic connection between students, their teachers, and the college in general. Moreover, educators must include experiential learning in curricular designs and coursework and create opportunities for dialectical learning experiences whereby students and teachers can challenge or affirm old knowledge and at the same time create new understandings.

It is also essential to offer and promote adult-oriented support mechanisms on campus. This effort means recognizing that many adult students do not have basic skills in English, writing, and mathematics and using assessment to measure their abilities and place them into the appropriate course

sequences. Social supports should also acknowledge the experiences and contributions that adults bring to the college and make in the classroom environment and demonstrate how they matter to the learning process. Administrators, teachers, and peers on campus must continually validate adult students' efforts and contributions. Furthermore, we must remember that adult students also undergo identity development while in college and must make new research efforts within this area a priority. Chickering's (1969) work is a good place to begin, but we must extend his vectors of identity development to adult students or create new ones. Finally, we must recognize that women often have different learning preferences than men. More research in this area is crucial, given that close to 60% of community college students are women and given that this number may be even higher among adult community college students. In particular, coupling Knowles's (1984) work on andragogy, along with Kolb's (1984) experiential learning construct, can help educators create a dialectical learning experience where students' old knowledge and experiences are used to create new knowledge and application, which can then lead to greater involvement, personal significance, and a heightened sense of commitment. Taken together, these theories have the potential to transform adult learning and vastly improve persistence and retention rates on community college campuses.

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