
In this book chapter, the author discusses several roles adult students play, common barriers they face in accessing higher education, and possible solutions. In addition to being students, adult students are caregivers, community leaders, and volunteer workers. They navigate college independently and usually do not live on-campus or engage in on-campus organizations. Adult students face three types of barriers: situational, dispositional, and institutional. While adult students face these barriers, their multiple identities can help them succeed in college. For example, adult students focus on learning skills and knowledge that are applicable to their life circumstances; they have a complex knowledge and experience base to draw from; and their involvement with their families, communities and careers enables a strong connection between classroom knowledge and real life. To support adult students, institutions can revisit their policies on providing services, provide a specialized orientation for adult students, acknowledge financial issues arising due to cost of attendance, offer institutional aid to part-time students since adult students are often part-time students, make low-cost child care available on campus, plan family-oriented extracurricular activities, and offer college credit for prior learning.


The author argues that adult students have limited opportunities to access research universities, which historically served traditional undergraduate students and often struggle to accommodate other populations. The author provides a comprehensive literature review of previous limited studies on adult students, most of which were conducted in four-year institutional settings. The review highlights research on adult students’ self-beliefs in the collegiate intergenerational classroom, climate for acceptance of adult students within varied institutional contexts, and institutional cultural bias and
varied sociocultural roles affecting adult student identities. In this study, the author explores adult undergraduate students’ experiences influenced by social and cultural aspects in a research university setting using the two original research questions: 1) How do adults describe their learning engagement in the classroom and its relationship to their broader life involvement? and 2) How do adults describe their perceptions of involvement in a collegiate institution?

The findings of the study indicate that the identity of adult undergraduate students is multi-layered, multi-sourced, and evolving. They shed light on the complex aspects of adult undergraduate students’ *positional* identities, which are constructed by their understanding of their social position in the world, and their *relational* identities, which are constructed by the dynamics of their social interactions and relationships with other individuals. Positional identities were influenced by factors such as being accepted by the university culture, experiencing otherness in a youth-oriented university environment, being academically competent, being a successful adult learner in the classroom, being a purposeful goal-oriented learner, and valuing their own maturity and active engagement. Relational identities in the research university context were influenced by faculty-adult student relationships, younger student to adult student relationships, and adult student valuing adult students.


The number of adults attending college has increased in recent years due to the decline of blue-collar jobs, individuals’ desire to acquire more marketable skills, and shifts in societal norms, such as the traditional role of women as homemakers. In this paper, the authors offer an updated synthesis of empirical findings on the barriers faced by adult students. Adult students face three types of barriers: institutional, dispositional, and situational. Institutional barriers result from decisions made by college and university leaders regarding admissions, financial aid, curriculum, and student services. Dispositional barriers result from specific individual characteristics, such as fear of failure, attitude towards intellectual activity, and level of aspiration. Situational barriers result from family and community obligations and personal finances. Childcare and work responsibilities, marriage and family responsibilities, finances, and transportation are listed as some of the prominent situational barriers. Difficulty navigating the educational system, inconvenient class schedules, limited course offerings, problems with college resources, and admissions and advising staff directed primarily toward younger students are listed as some of the prominent institutional barriers. Insecurities and anxiety about succeeding academically, perceived differences between adults and other students, feeling out of place, and low self-efficacy stemming from anxiety or low performance from previous schools are listed as some of the prominent dispositional barriers.

As per the National Center for Educational Statistics projections of 2007-2018 higher education enrollment, the number of students over the age of twenty-five will remain stable or increase during the current decade. When the term “nontraditional student” is broadly defined to include seven characteristics typically not associated with participation in college, 73 percent of students may be viewed as nontraditional. Thus, it is crucial to address the needs of this group of students. The authors of this paper summarize the multiple roles of adult learners, programmatic responses to facilitate adult learning, theories about adult learners, and research on adult learners in college classrooms. Adult learners play multiple roles, such as worker, spouse or partner, parent, caregiver, and community member, and may struggle to make time for both academic study and participation in campus-based organizations. Some institutions adopt programs to facilitate adult learning, including distance education, prior learning assessment for college credit, and accelerated course formats. There are several theoretical approaches to understand adult learners, but the andragogy framework is considered the best. As per this framework, adult learners prefer self-direction in learning, bring a vast reservoir of experience to their studies, exhibit a readiness to learn, demonstrate an orientation to learning that is task- or problem-centered instead of subject-centered, and display a relatively high degree of internal motivation. Other adult learning theories center on self-directed learning, a key assumption of andragogy. Prior research on adult learners in college suggests that while adult learners desire flexibility, they also often desire structure. For example, while they desire flexibility in the learning process, they expect their teachers to communicate their expectations in a highly structured way. Research indicates that adult learners exhibit varied learning styles, which is especially true in case of adult students of color, veteran students, and adult students with disabilities.