A Journey Through Adult Student Involvement on Campus

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Astin’s (1984) involvement theory suggests that student involvement has a positive impact on development and learning. He hypothesized, “the greater the student’s involvement in college, the greater will be the amount of student learning and personal growth” (p. 307). Additionally, he postulated that student involvement leads to increased satisfaction with the entire college experience and increased retention rates. Astin’s philosophy on involvement has been foundational for additional research consideration. However, there has been little research applying this theory to adult learners. This article explores available research on the needs of adult learners, types of involvement that might enhance their learning and personal growth, and how faculty and student affairs professionals can assist this growing population of adult learners.

During the past forty years, students who attended college likely heard the slogan, “Get involved!” all over campus. People may wonder why faculty, administrators, and other students persist so doggedly to involve undergraduates in both academics and experiences offered outside the classroom. Is it because groups represented by these enthusiastic individuals simply need members to survive and carry out their goals and purposes? Or, does active participation have some benefit to the students who choose to take advantage of those opportunities? According to Astin’s (1999) theory of involvement, students can actively participate in creating a positive impact on their own development and learning. He also postulates that student involvement leads to increased satisfaction with the entire college experience as well as increased rates of student retention.

Astin’s (1999) theory, originally published in 1984, has since spurred considerable research and discussion on the impact of student involvement. However, few studies examine how this theory applies to adult learners. This article explores the available research on the needs of adult learners, and the types of involvement that might enhance their learning and personal growth. It also addresses faculty and student affairs professionals can assist the growing population of adult learners in becoming involved in beneficial opportunities. In
addition, the author will examine the limitations of the current body of research.

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and suggest possibilities for further exploration. In order to examine these issues critically, it is important to explore both Astin’s foundational study and the ways in which adult learners differ from traditional students.

**THE FOUNDATION**

Astin’s (1999) research has served as the catalyst for many additional studies on student involvement; thus, it is important to first review his primary findings. In examining the college environment for influences on students’ development and retention, Astin discovered that almost all of the following influences directly correlated to students’ levels of involvement: place of residence, participation in athletics, membership in student government, activity in honors programs, academic involvement, type of employment, and interaction between students and faculty (or other college personnel). The most persuasive types of involvement “turn out to be academic involvement, involvement with faculty, and involvement with student peer groups” (Astin, 1996, p. 126).

Astin (1999) defined involvement as both the “...quantity and quality of the physical and psychological energy that students invest in the college experience” (p. 528). In other words, students’ physical engagements (participating actively through observable behaviors) and mental applications (through aspects such as concentration, commitment, and motivation), together compose involvement. Involvement then can be measured both quantitatively (by determining how many hours a student spends studying, attending meetings, or thinking about a subject) and qualitatively, by examining a student’s comprehension of material, role in participation (being a member of a group versus being a leader), or depth of reflection. Astin (1996) suggested that levels of involvement occur along a continuum, varying in intensity for each student, and differing between students. He suggested that student time is a resource, claiming that the degree of development
a student accomplishes in any area is related directly to the quality and quantity of time and effort (involvement) dedicated toward achieving any goal. Thus, a greater amount of student involvement results in a greater gain in learning and personal development. Astin concluded that the usefulness of educational policies and practices could be measured by the degree of student involvement each elicits.

In addition, Astin (1996) found negative outcomes associated with forms of involvement that “either isolate the student from peers or remove the student physically from the campus” (p. 126). He referred to these as types of “noninvolvement”. Specifically, he listed “living at home, commuting, attending part-time, being employed off campus, being employed full-time, and watching television” (p. 126) as components of “noninvolvement.”
ADULT STUDENTS

Although all students are considered to be adults when they enter college, for the purposes of this article, adult students or adult learners refer to undergraduate students who are 22 years old or older. Adult students represent a diverse population; they are “working and nonworking; married and single; parents and nonparents; self-supporting and needing financial aid… male and female” (Greenfeig & Goldberg, 1984, p. 83). Adult learners have unique pressures compared to those of traditional students. “Many returning adults are suffering from low confidence and low self-esteem and are very unsure of their abilities and self-worth” (p. 82). They may believe that their study skills are rusty and fear they will not be able to compete with undergraduates coming directly from high school. In addition, “returning adult students and transfers often suffer because of their isolation from each other. They have difficulty finding other students with whom they share common interests and concerns” (Upcraft, Finney, & Garland, 1984, p. 11). Interpersonal relationships are important elements to students’ success in college (Billson & Terry; Fiedler & Vance; Simpson, Baker, & Mellinger as cited in Upcraft et al, 1984). Adult students must make new friends, while “maintaining meaningful yet changing” preexisting relationships with family members and others (Upcraft et al., 1984, p. 16). Types of adult student involvement should include opportunities which build confidence and self-esteem, consider the multiple demands on their time, and involve peer interaction.

INFLUENCES ON STUDENT LEARNING AND PERSONAL GROWTH

Following Astin’s original postulations, several other researchers have revealed benefits associated with student involvement. According to Abrahamowicz (as cited in Hunt & Rentz, 1994), student involvement has been found to; positively affect students’ overall satisfaction with the college experience, foster the continuing pursuit of academics, and facilitate personal growth and development. When students are involved, they are likely to
identify more closely with their institution and feel they play an important role within it. Positive feelings about their institution contribute to an enjoyment of academics and learning, and promote the desire to further their education beyond the undergraduate years. Finally, personal growth and development occur when students are involved in opportunities that provide stimulation, challenge, and exposure to diversity. The more involved students are, the more likely they are to benefit intellectually and personally. Miller and Jones (as cited in Fitch, 1991), went even further asserting that extracurricular programs should be viewed as essential components to overall education since they provide such strong benefits, rather than being considered merely supplemental, as they are by many administrators.
**BENEFITS FOR ADULT STUDENTS**

Similar benefits have been found relating to adult student involvement. Whitt (1994) established that, “Involvement in high quality out-of-class experiences contributes to the learning, development, and satisfaction of adult students” (p. 312). Adult learners reported increased confidence, better time management skills, and a connection to the university. Adult students showed special interest in clubs and organizations related to their majors, but “not to the exclusion of more traditional student activities. [Students] were involved in activities ranging from adult student orientation to homecoming, from student government to volunteering in the campus daycare center” (p. 313). Many adult students want a sense of belonging and want to play active roles at their universities and colleges.

**INSTITUTIONAL CLIMATE**

As mentioned previously, student involvement can influence students’ identification with the institution and their desire to play an important role within it. Reciprocally, Astin (1999) suggested that “it is easier to become involved when one can identify with the college environment” (p. 524). According to the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, “Generally speaking, when there is a congruence between an individual and the campus environment, that student will be happier, better adjusted, and more likely to achieve personal and educational goals” (as cited in Upcraft, Finney, & Garland, 1984 p. 10). Adult students may be challenged because they often are attending institutions designed to fulfill the expectations and needs of younger students (Nutter, Kroeger, & Kinnick, 1991). Although some adult students are involved, the campus structure and environment does not currently support adult development. “One step in the investigation of the match or ‘goodness of fit’ between institutions and adult learners is to examine to what extent students use the major resources for personal growth available in the college environment” (p. 349).
TYPES OF INVOLVEMENT

Involvement opportunities take many forms including participating in one’s learning and academics, interacting with faculty/staff, interacting with peers, participating in athletics, joining student organizations, honor societies, or student government associations, doing community service, and working in a part-time or full-time job (Eklund-Leen & Young, 1997; Hernandez, Hogan, Hathaway, & Lovell, 1999; McCannon & Bennett, 1996). Although many
benefits have been found related to specific types of involvement, there are many unanswered questions with regard to how these involvement types relate to adult students.

A major limitation of current research is the lack of analysis regarding how the involvement theory applies to adult learners (Hernandez, Hogan, Hathaway, & Lovell, 1999; Nutter, Kroeger, & Kinnick, 1991; Whitt, 1994). Most studies have focused on students of traditional age, 17-22 years old. Yet, over 45% of all undergraduate and graduate students were over the age of 25 in 1991 (Nutter et al., 1991) and, more recently, the Census Bureau (1998) identified 55.8% of undergraduate students as being over the age of 22 in the Fall of 1998. There is a great need to explore types of involvement opportunities and their benefits for adult students.

On the other hand, Astin’s (1999) types of ‘noninvolvement’ are found to be congruent with the lives of adult students. Most adult students live off-campus, commute to school, attend part-time, and are employed off campus, often full-time. These activities remove adult students from the university campus and decrease the likelihood of positive involvements and interactions with peers who share similar struggles and experiences.

Studies have indicated that personality and values may influence the types of individuals who are likely to get involved (Fitch, 1991). Then again, students only have limited time and energy to give to each part of their lives. It is important to determine when a students’ involvement in organizations can be too demanding and start to negatively impact other areas of their lives. If there is disequilibrium and a disproportionate amount of time given to one form of involvement, other areas of a student’s life may suffer. These results have considerable implications for how administrators in higher education should encourage future involvement and better support adult students. If time is considered the most valuable student resource (Astin, 1999), it may explain why it is difficult to involve adult students, who not
only have the regular time demands of other students, but also may have careers and families demanding their time (Upcraft, Finney, & Garland, 1984).

NATURE VERSUS NURTURE

The college experience is a combination of what students bring to college and what the institution provides during their enrollment (Upcraft, Finney, & Garland, 1984). Unfortunately, although adult students bring many skills, they may lack confidence; “When we ask returning adults to list their strengths and weaknesses, their list of weaknesses is often twice as long as their strengths”
Adult students possess many assets, such as "strong academic abilities, unique life experiences, and strong motivation" (p. 82). Academically, they have an advantage over traditional undergraduates by having specific goals and by dedicating more time to studying. Adult students typically are more satisfied by their courses (Greenfeig & Goldberg, 1984). They have valuable experiences from volunteering, working, parenting, and balancing family roles. They can apply this knowledge in their courses and interactions with others. In addition, adult students have a greater sense of purpose, motivation, direction, and commitment to both their studies and the institution. Regrettably, adult students do not easily recognize their strengths and their opportunities to share with others.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Student affairs professionals and faculty members need to realize the impact they can have in involving adult students. For example, Whitt (1994) found that encouragement by peers, faculty, and other staff members provided essential support to get adult learners involved. Often, these supportive individuals demonstrated their belief in a student’s capabilities and potential, which encouraged self-confidence and, thus, involvement. Peers especially increased adult students’ feelings of acceptance and allowed them to share common experiences and address similar concerns.

Edwards and Person (1997) provide specific examples of how student affairs professionals and peers can assist adult students through providing information and resources to help them feel more compatible with their educational institution. These opportunities begin with adult students’ first visits to campus. Adult students often benefit most from one-on-one counseling, which allows them to explore options and discuss their individual concerns related to the academic and social expectations of college life (Upcraft, Finney, & Garland, 1984). Concerns may include academics, time constraints, finances, personal needs, and family
support (Edwards & Person, 1997). Providing effective, individual attention and care helps adult students feel welcome and supported. First-year seminars, which include or are specifically designed to meet the needs of adult students, should also be provided. To support both their educational objectives and their transition to college, “the curriculum should include current literature on issues facing the adult learner population in the classroom and should incorporate articles, media presentations and class discussion of the students’ experiences” (Edwards & Person, 1997, p. 19). Since many adult students have multiple demands on their time, campus offices can assist them by providing some extended hours weekly, during evenings. Finally, matching new students with peer mentors or second-year adult learners will create peer
connections and support for discussing concerns and their orientation to the campus. These partnerships give new students a link to the institution through students within the population. Providing information and resources, thereby helping students to feel supported by their college or university, can increase students’ institutional commitment and involvement (Tinto as cited in Edwards & Person, 1997).

Non-traditional aged students often do not live on campus and generally have other priorities such as work and family, which can limit their availability to participate in many common forms of involvement (Greenfeig & Goldberg, 1984; Upcraft, Finney, & Garland, 1984; Whitt, 1994). A priority among current and future faculty and student personnel administrators should be to conduct and implement research on ways to consider the specific needs of an adult population and provide more flexibility. Some suggestions from current research that may address the particular needs of this population are: a) using multiple approaches for a variety of needs, b) providing child-care services, c) initiating peer support groups, d) allowing family involvement in activities, preferably for free, e) providing opportunities with multiple levels of involvement to consider time restrictions, and f) incorporating academic support services to boost confidence and update skills (Greenfeig & Goldberg, 1984; Whitt, 1994).

Ultimately, there is no perfect formula for encouraging adult student involvement. It is difficult to know which type of involvement would be best for which students or how to create the perfect involvement experience for any one student. There are too many variables to consider, and many have yet to be researched. Even if every variable could be considered, students remain individuals and thus, have diverse preferences, abilities, and needs.

Nevertheless, theories, such as Astin’s (1999) theory of involvement, give professionals a framework to begin to understand how to provide better opportunities for a diverse population of students. Professionals in higher education continue
to learn more about adult student needs and to formulate new ways to provide effective services. Faculty members and student affairs staff should work together to utilize the current body of knowledge and should continue to ask questions worth researching to assist adult students and encourage their involvement. This will include incorporating new information as it comes along, especially as technology continues to progress at its current rapid pace. The journey toward greater understanding of adult students’ needs and the exploration of ways to maximize their involvement opportunities and experiences has barely begun. However, it promises an exciting territory for student affairs professionals.
REFERENCES


