Chapter 8

Adult Learners: Emerging Activists of the Modern Campus

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ABSTRACT

Student activism is mostly thought of as an activity that engages and motivates the traditional-aged students in American higher education to action. The emergence of student activism in the 1960s occurred when enrollment in American higher education was still primarily limited to youth from middle- and upper-class families. The demographics of American higher education have shifted, and the adult learner or non-traditional student now represents a significant amount, if not the majority, of most campus populations. The adult learner brings unique perspective to the higher education classroom based upon their real-world experiences that directly impacts their values, beliefs, and ideas about societal issues. Adult learners in American higher education have the potential to change the ways, means, and longstanding outcomes related to activism in American higher education.

INTRODUCTION

In 2000, Kasworm, Sandmann and Sissel asserted that “higher education is quickly becoming the knowledge crossroads for adult society rather than a mere cul-de-sac for elite youth learners and esoteric knowledge” (p. 449). Arguably, higher education remains squarely at the aforementioned “knowledge crossroads” as colleges and universities still struggle to understand and properly serve adult learners. Delivery of
adult learner friendly programs and services is a key priority for many colleges and universities. The support of adult learners who wish to become involved in activism efforts, thereby demonstrating their ability to juxtapose their life experience with newfound knowledge to advocate regarding a societal issue or concern, is probably not a priority for many colleges and universities. Activism is thought of as an activity for traditional students.

The change in the shift of the student body at America’s colleges and universities from traditional to adult learners in many ways mirrors the emergence of student activism in American higher education. The shift of student enrollments and increase of activism among students in American higher education also aligns to the introduction and refinement of adult learning theories and principles in American education, especially as those theories have been applied and tested on the campuses of American colleges and universities. American higher education institutions have become the venue where three simultaneous events occurred over the past five decades. First, student demographics have shifted from traditional to non-traditional or adult learner. Second, student activism has emerged and sustained in one form or another. Finally, adult learning principles have been vetted, refined, and influenced the delivery of course content. There is a connection to these three events, albeit often unrecognized by higher education faculty, staff, and administrators. Greater understanding of adult learners and their emergence on college campuses would help college and university administrators understand the nature of activism in American higher education.

NONTRADITIONAL STUDENT: THE NEW TRADITIONAL STUDENT

The National Center for Educational Statistics reports that approximately 74% of all undergraduate college students in the United States have at least one nontraditional characteristic. These characteristics of nontraditional or adult students in higher education include 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). This shift in student demographics has been gradually occurring over many decades and have caused higher education leaders to rethink its design and delivery models. Most of this attention has been directed toward relevant curriculum for career progression or changes in delivery formats. The changes have focused on essential activities to support adult learner access, retention, graduation, and transitions.
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