Chapter 9

Anytime/Anywhere Online Learning:
Does It Remove Barriers for Adult Learners?

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ABSTRACT

Even with the convenience of anytime/anywhere online learning, adult learners still encounter barriers and challenges. This chapter explores the growth of online education in higher education and the participation of adult learners. The chapter introduces K. Patricia Cross’ research about the situational, dispositional, and institutional barriers faced by adult learners in the 1980s. The relevancy of these barriers to today’s adult distance learners is examined. Characteristics of adult learners are discussed. New barriers for learners introduced by online education are explored, including social interaction barriers, technology barriers, student-support barriers, pedagogy barriers, and accessibility barriers. Suggestions for removing and/or reducing these barriers are discussed, including providing technical support services, offering online orientations, pre-assessing student readiness, providing professional development opportunities for faculty which model andragogy and online course methodology, and designing online courses to support learning preferences of adult learners. Recommendations are made for future research.

INTRODUCTION

What impact has distance education had on adult higher education and the barriers faced by adult learners? The objective of this chapter is to answer this question. First, the participation of adults in higher education and the growth of distance education within higher education is discussed. Next, the situational, institutional, and dispositional barriers faced by adult learners (Cross, 1992) are analyzed as they relate to distance education. With this foundation in place, new barriers which adult online learners must overcome, including social interaction barriers, technology barriers, student-support barriers, pedagogy barriers, and accessibility barriers, are explored. Recommendations are provided for
minimizing the barriers encountered by adult learners in distance education.

BACKGROUND

Adult Learners

Kazis et al. (2007) reported that 44% of United States college students are adult learners with possibly 37 million additional adults interested in continuing their education. However, these adult learners encounter obstacles since many institutions have designed their programs to support traditional-aged students (Addressing the Needs, 2006). Rudestam and Shoeholtz-Read (2002) reported that “most current online students are adult professionals looking for additional training” (p. 6). According to Levine and Sun (2002), adult students are suitable candidates for distance education and are bringing “consumer attitudes to higher education – convenience, service, high quality, and low cost” (p. 4). Results from a recent survey of community colleges conducted by the Instructional Technology Council indicated that over half of distance education students in the responding schools were non-traditional adult students (2007 Distance Education, 2008).

Growth of Distance Education

Distance education in the form of online learning is pervasive in higher education. According to Kazis et al. (2007), “on-line education programs and courses can be found in all higher education segments” (p. 12). Rudestam and Shoeholtz-Read (2002) stated “nearly every institution of higher learning has incorporated or intends to incorporate some aspects of online technology into its curriculum” (p. 9). Kazis et al. reported that from 2002 to 2005, enrollment in online courses increased by almost 250 percent. This includes enrollments in community colleges, public colleges and universities, and for-profit colleges and universities. According to Levine and Sun (2002), online enrollments at the for-profit University of Phoenix “increased from less than 5,000 in 1997 to nearly 50,000 in 2002” (p. 5). Kinser (2002) indicated that the for-profit virtual institutions, such as Western Governors University represent a new model for postsecondary education. Kretovics (2003) suggested that the virtual institutions have begun to change the perception of distance education from just one of many delivery methods to the pedagogy in use throughout an institution of higher learning.

Due to being utilized at nearly every school, popularized by virtual institutions, and fueled by impressive growth, distance education has had a profound impact on adult education. Cross (1992) described barriers that adult learners face in higher education. The next section describes the barriers researched by Cross and explores additional barriers that are encountered by learners in distance education.

THE THREE BARRIERS

Cross (1992) studied adult learners in the 1980s and identified situational, dispositional, and institutional barriers encountered by adults in higher education. Situational and dispositional barriers relate directly to the student themselves. Institutional barriers are impediments created by the institution of higher learning and are typically out of the learner’s direct control.

Situational Barriers

Cross (1992) considered situational barriers as hindrances that “arise from one’s situation in life at a given time” (p. 98). Obstacles described by Cross in this category include lack of money, lack of time, too many home responsibilities, too many work responsibilities, child care issues, lack of transportation, lack of study area, and lack of
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