Chapter 17
Applying Distance Learning and Structural/Pedagogical Methods to an Adult Learner Program: The Case of Global Business Management

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ABSTRACT
Adult learner students are becoming a key segment of the undergraduate college market; however, adults have a different set of needs, orientations, and approaches to learning. This paper examines the background and characteristics of adult learners, together with various approaches to meeting the needs of these non-traditional students (distance learning, intensive and block scheduling, modular learning, etc.). The application of these methods and techniques are illustrated in the structure and implementation of a real-life adult learner program for business undergraduates.

INTRODUCTION
To meet the needs of students in the 21st century, it is critical to examine the state of the educational market and to target the specific needs of those who will be enrolling in and graduating from degree-based programs. The dynamics and demographics of college students are changing, and educational institutions need to change and adapt to meet their needs and requirements.

Currently, most undergraduate university programs are targeted towards students in their late teens or early twenties who have completed high school and are pursuing degrees in preparation for a future career. Thus, most academic programs are currently designed to meet the learning preferences and scheduling needs of the “traditional” college student. At the same time, adults are forming an important segment of the educational market, and their increasing numbers are becoming an important force comprising a solid portion of the overall undergraduate population. It has been noted that almost half of undergraduate students can be categorized under the categories of “non-traditional”
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or “adult learners” (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002).

Adult students are generally older and frequently exhibit less-developed or alternate approaches to learning. While many possess a great deal of professional experience and knowledge, adult students frequently lack a firm grounding in a variety of business and other theoretical knowledge areas that an undergraduate college business degree provides. Work and home responsibilities often make it more difficult for them to attend classes scheduled during the daytime or on weekday evenings.

However, adult students also typically bring to the classroom positive attitudes and perspectives that are conducive and make them more eager to obtain both short- and long-term value from their college learning experience. Many have more focused career-oriented goals and orientations. Generally, adults are more engaged and involved in the learning process and seek to master a subject because they understand the benefits provided by enhanced knowledge to career performance and advancement. Adults tend to ask more questions, demand more class discussion, and seek connections between the material and practical applications from work. The result is a need for more dynamic and real-time learning focused toward specific goals or agendas related to improving careers and lives (Hamilton, 2002).

In contrast, traditional undergraduates are generally inexperienced and less mature, are more focused towards social aspects of college life, and place greater emphasis on grades to meet the expectations of parents. As a result, many traditional students exhibit a more passive approach to learning with emphasis on absorbing and memorizing what “experts” profess. One of the important tasks of a traditional undergraduate education, therefore, is to provide social and life experiences to help students develop a context upon which educational knowledge can be built.

Adult Learners, Degrees, and Learning

Adult learners comprise part of a category known as “non-traditional” undergraduate students. It was found that roughly half of all college students in the U.S. can be considered non-traditional students, a significant portion of which are adult learners. The number is growing, and it is conceivable that very soon the majority of students will fall into this category, according to the National Center for Education Statistics (Horn, 1996). Some of the core characteristics of non-traditional students are that they delayed enrollment (did not enter college after high school), are likely to attend part time, have full-time jobs, and are likely to be married with dependents (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002).

While traditional students enroll as the next logical step after high school, 73% of adult non-traditional students attend college for the purposes of career advancement, to improve their knowledge in a subject area, and/or to complete a degree to add to their credentials (U.S. Department of Education, 2002).

Adults seeking an undergraduate degree are driven by the fact that a college education is not only desirable, but necessary in today’s highly competitive global job market and business environment. In fact, many jobs which will be available in the future will require higher-level cognitive skills that only a portion of current workers possess (Occupational Outlook Handbook, 1999). Yet, the majority of programs serving adult learners are conducted by corporate sponsors, rather than by government or educational institutions. In fact, only a fraction of existing adult programs are run by traditional colleges and universities, although the number has been increasing. All things considered, there is a shortage of learning opportunities that provide adults with the higher order educational knowledge and skills desired by employers.

Positive characteristics of adult learners include self-directedness, a focus on immedi-
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