Adult Learners in Higher Education

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Abstract

Adult learners are increasingly prevalent in U.S. higher education, but they still face barriers that make it difficult for them to succeed. Even though adult learners have the motivation, experience, and persistence to succeed, they still face the lack of flexibility and support services in higher education institutions, which are designed to meet the needs of traditional-aged students.

This paper examines the identity, sense of belonging, and motivation of adult learners through the theoretical perspectives of Knowles' Theory of Andragogy, Self-Determination Theory, and Expectancy-Value Theory. The paper also investigates how adult learners' goals, responsibilities, and experiences converge with institutional policies, course offerings, and campus environments. The paper will use studies by Cross (1981), Kasworm (2006), Ross-Gordon (2011), Sogunro (2015), and others that demonstrate how institutions can include or exclude adult learners.

Findings from the study suggest that adult learners' success is influenced not only by personal motivation but also by the extent to which institutions provide flexible, inclusive, and equitable learning environments. Recognizing adult learners as integral members of the campus community and addressing the structural inequalities are key to fostering persistence, engagement, and academic achievement. Institutional accountability and responsive policies are critical factors in bridging the gap between adult learners' needs and higher education structures.

Keywords: adult learners, higher education, motivation, retention, equity, marginalization

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Introduction

Over the last few years, the demographic makeup of students at universities in the United States has changed (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2023). Recent enrollment trends indicate that the number of adult learners (students 25+) at postsecondary institutions in the United States is on the rise, with older students enrolling in undergraduate programs after years of decline (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2024). Various external factors, including demographic shifts, the need for additional education to meet workforce demands, and the growing requirement for post-secondary education for financial well-being, have driven this shift, placing adult learners at the center of the higher education landscape (Carnevale et al., 2013). Adult learners often have to balance many roles, such as employment, financial obligations, and family life, while also attending school, making their educational journeys different from those of traditional students.

Despite the growing presence on campus, adult learners continue to encounter barriers within higher education (Choy, 2002). Some barriers may include the need for flexible course schedules, inadequate advising, lack of financial aid (for those who are part-time), and campus cultures that disregard adult learners. Due to these barriers, this population may have lower retention rates, even if they have demonstrated motivation and goals before beginning their programs (Choy, 2002). This paper examines the relationship between adult learners' needs and the institutional structures that shape learning within universities in the United States. Although this gap exists in both public and private institutions, it has become more pronounced in recent years due to an increase in adult learner enrollment (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2024).

In addition, while past literature on adult learners has explored motivation, persistence, and external barriers in depth, there has been little attention to the role of institutional accountability systems in shaping adult learners' identity and sense of belonging. Past research that was conducted on adult learner success has focused primarily on resilience, time management, and accessibility of support services. A few studies integrate psychological theories of adult development; however, most focus on organizational performance and policy (Bastedo, 2012). This makes it difficult to capture the role of institutional norms in marginalization. This paper seeks to integrate adult learning and institutional critiques to provide a more informed understanding of belonging and persistence in higher education.

This paper argues that adult learners in higher education in the United States are marginalized by institutional policies that were originally designed for traditional-aged students. These policies were initially designed with traditional-aged students in mind, based on an analysis of student and policy perspectives informed by theories of adult learning and motivation. By utilizing theories such as the Andragogy Theory by Malcom Knowles and the Self-Determination Theory by Deci & Ryan, this paper will show that adult learners' experiences can be understood through a structural lens.

Literature Review

Historical Context

Early literature on adult learning was very focused on the structural and contextual barriers that shape adult learners. Cross's (1981) study introduced one of the most influential pieces of understanding adult learners and the barriers they face, including institutional, situational, and dispositional barriers. Situational barriers are described as competition for time,

such as careers and family responsibilities; institutional barriers are policies that limit access and flexibility; and dispositional barriers reflect students' perceptions and confidence (Cross, 1981). This study helped redirect the research's attention away from deficit approaches to the adult learner and towards the bigger picture of how they learn in higher education contexts (Cross, 1981). Therefore, it is critical to mention that Cross's work is influential in contemporary research on adult learner identity and equity. In addition, early literature on adult learners also focused on the fact that adults differ in their motivations to learn. Houle (1961) identifies three types of adult learners: goal-oriented, activity-oriented, and learning-oriented. It was argued that adult learners are often motivated to further their education with a clear purpose or end goal (Houle, 1961). We take a closer look at this in more detail further in the literature review under the motivation of adult learners.

Adult Learner Identity, Belonging, and Lived Experience

In the text *Setting the Stage: Adults in Higher Education*, Kasworm (2006) examines the growing number of adult learners in postsecondary education and notes that "higher education institutions have not yet fully responded to the needs of adult learners." We are introduced to adult learners in the context of demographic, economic, and social changes, pointing to the increasing trend of returning to college to gain career benefits, achieve economic security, and develop themselves (Kasworm, 2006).

Kasworm (2006) highlights that adult students bring a great deal of life experience, motivation, and goal orientation into the learning environment, strengthening the educational setting. Yet these are the elements that are underappreciated in the educational setting, which views adult students as "non-traditional" and, somehow, as anomalies to the typical college experience, rather than as a key pillar of the academic community. The article also points out the

structural problems adult learners encounter in their learning process, including inflexible scheduling, limited access to financial assistance, insufficient recognition of prior learning, and inadequate support services (Kasworm, 2006). The article suggested that these problems do not lie in the individual but in institutional misalignment (Kasworm, 2006). With this, it can be said that adults have to cope with a system not responsive to their needs, which makes it much more likely for this group to suffer from stress, dropping out, and their degrees taking years longer to complete.

At the end of the article, a new approach to conceptualizing how adult learners have been addressed in institutions of higher learning was proposed. The article also argued that now is the time for institutions to move away from a deficit-focused approach and accept a more thorough one that considers adult students in higher education (Kasworm, 2006). This article provided a strong understanding of adult learner identity, institutional responsibility, and the ethical consequences of failing to address the needs of this growing population. Additional literature on adult students has further highlighted identity and a sense of belonging as highly influential factors in students' experiences in higher education institutions (Kasworm, 2006). Kasworm (2006) suggested that adult students in higher education feel invisible in certain situations that are more geared toward "traditional" students. In these situations, the feelings of adult students were not taken into account.

Building on this idea, Speirs (2018) examined the experiences of working-class adult learners. In this study, Speirs reached a conclusion similar to Kasworm which is that higher education may be a difficult environment for adults. Participants in the study reported experiencing learning environments that conflicted with their values, backgrounds, and prior life experiences, ultimately leading to feelings of self-doubt and a sense of legitimacy (Speirs, 2018).

This data showed that adult learners feel that, in higher education, their identities are often not recognized, which can create issues with a sense of connectedness and inclusivity (Speirs, 2018).

Ross-Gordon's (2011) article examines the growing number of adults in higher education and argues that, rather than being considered a "non-traditional" group, adult learners should be viewed from a new perspective. Interestingly, the author challenges views of academic unpreparedness or lack of commitment among adult learners; instead, she focuses on the institution's role in supporting adult learners' needs (Ross-Gordon, 2011). One key point mentioned in the article was that adult learners should be seen as a whole and that institutions should take on this sense of responsibility. With that said, institutions should have flexibility in scheduling and strong support structures that acknowledge the many "hats" adult learners wear.

Although Ross-Gordon's (2011) and Speirs's (2018) articles utilize different methodologies, both agree on their critique of institutions of higher education organized around traditional student norms. Ross-Gordon's (2011) article stresses institutional accountability, stating that policies, practices, and support systems must be modified to reflect the needs of adult learners rather than being viewed as problems to be overcome or accomplished. Speirs' study supported this, as his work carefully examines the experiences of working-class adult learners and how the lack of alignment between educational institutions and learners' needs creates self-doubt, legitimacy issues, and marginalization in the educational setting (Speirs, 2018). All in all, these studies examine a complex set of systematic and personal issues faced by adult learners.

Further, the literature by Kasworm (2006), Speirs (2018), and Ross-Gordon (2011) shows how the identity and sense of belonging of adult learners are influenced not by who they are as individuals, but by the cultures of institutions that adopt the traditional student norm. These studies have shown that labeling adult learners as "non-traditional" marginalizes their

experiences, knowledge, and responsibilities in higher education. Failing to consider adult learners as integral members of the university community may lead to feelings of self-doubt and invisibility (Kasworm, 2006). Thus, issues of identity and a sense of belonging are key to understanding adult learners' motivations in higher education.

Motivation of Adult Learners

Sogunro's (2015) article examines the factors that motivate adult learners to enroll in and continue in higher education, noting that more traditional students differ from adult learners in their goals and expectations. The study examines both intrinsic and extrinsic motivating factors. Adult learners are more driven by purposeful and outcome-oriented goals that reflect their life experiences (Sogunro, 2015). In addition, the study stresses the importance of institutional practices that can either promote or hinder adult learners' motivation (Sogunro, 2015).

The article argues that learning environments that value the experience of adult learners while also prioritizing respect and adaptability have greater potential to promote student motivation (Sogunro, 2015). On the other hand, those schools that lean more towards traditional learning styles can negatively impact adult learners (Sogunro, 2015). All in all, Sogunro's (2015) article stressed the importance of a learner-centered process that promotes the overall success and well-being of adult learners.

Drawing on motivation and perseverance, Lee's (2017) article examines adult learner retention through the lens of the *Nontraditional Undergraduate Student Attrition Model*. According to the study, adult learners' perseverance is not based solely on motivation but on a blend of environmental, academic, and psychosocial factors (Lee, 2017). With this, it's important to note that the external factors involved with adult learners, such as jobs, families, and financial

situations, and the support systems of the university, play a key role in their perseverance (Lee, 2017).

Further, the article argues that adult learners' persistence is enhanced when universities address non-academic barriers and provide appropriate support (Lee, 2017). This supports the idea that adult learners' motivation is not only determined by individual characteristics, but is closely related to the support structures offered and the institutional responses to the issue. Overall, both Lee's (2017) and Sogunro's (2015) articles have reinforced the fact that adult learners' motivation and determination are related to their goals and to universities' responsiveness to the needs of adult learners.

Manyeki's (2007) study examined the factors that motivate adult learners to return to school, often stressing the roles of socioeconomic and contextual factors. The study identified career advancement, improved quality of life, and financial stability as the primary motivators for adult learners (Manyeki, 2007). The findings in this study are consistent with existing research suggesting that adult learners view education as an investment rather than simply an educational pursuit.

It's also important to note that the study pointed out family responsibilities and social expectations as key influences on adult learners. As we've seen above, adult learners must balance many responsibilities while pursuing a higher education degree, including caregiving and employment. This study was no different. It was argued that when institutions fail to acknowledge contextual factors (e.g., limited scheduling flexibility or a lack of financial support), adult learners may experience motivational strain (Manyeki, 2007). This study reinforced the argument that institutional responsiveness is a key piece in sustaining adult learners' motivation and supporting academic success.

Overall, the studies by Sogunro (2015), Lee (2017), and Manyeki (2007) demonstrate the relationship between adult learners' motivation and their personal and institutional goals, as well as their institutional and life circumstances. The model of non-traditional student attrition developed by Bean and Metzner (1985) points out the important part played by environmental factors. Unlike traditional students, adult students are much more affected by external factors such as work, financial problems, and family. Therefore, even if intrinsic and extrinsic motivation are high, structural factors may interfere with persistence. These studies contribute to the view that motivation among adult learners is not simply a product of individual characteristics but an evolving, institutional process.

Adult Learner Retention and Persistence

Osam et al. (2016) conducted a detailed review of the literature on the barriers that affect adult learners' decisions to return to school. The authors grouped barriers into three key categories: situational, institutional, and dispositional (Osam et al., 2016). Situational barriers included work, financial, and family ties that may affect students' academics, whereas institutional barriers included inflexibility in course structure, limited access to academic advising, and university policies that do not take adult learners into account (Osam et al., 2016). Osam et al. (2016) indicated that dispositional barriers are those associated with adult learners' perceptions, such as self-doubt and anxiety about returning to school.

It's important to note that the literature indicates that the barriers mentioned are rarely experienced in isolation and are more likely to accumulate over time (Osam et al., 2016). The authors also argued that if universities do not develop responsive support systems, adult learners may experience academic delays (Osam et al., 2016). Based on this, it can be said that the student has not failed academically; rather, the lack of support between the school and the adult

learner is ultimately key to understanding the challenges of retention and persistence in adult learners.

Building on this, other studies have examined how these barriers affect adult learners' completion of their degrees. Kouassi (2023) further examines adult learners' perceptions of barriers affecting time to degree completion. The study used a qualitative approach to examine adult learners' experiences in higher education and found that, despite high motivation to complete their degrees, their persistence in doing so was frequently associated with institutional barriers (Kouassi, 2023). Similar to the above, these barriers consist of a lack of course flexibility, poor academic advising, and financial commitment.

A key point in the study was the *stop-out behavior* rather than permanent withdrawal from a student's program (Kouassi, 2023). Kouassi (2023) found that, in this context, adult learners described discontinuing their education as a response to mounting situational and institutional pressures, with the intention of returning once things improved. Those who experienced delays or interruptions in completing their degrees also experienced frustration in institutional systems (Kouassi, 2023). Kouassi (2023) further argued that institutions often misconstrue stop-out patterns as a lack of commitment rather than recognizing them as a response to inflexible frameworks among adult learners. The findings from this study reinforce the bigger picture: adult learner retention challenges motivation and is focused more on institutional structures that fail to accommodate adult learners' complex life circumstances.

Saunders' (2019) study examined how situational, institutional, and dispositional barriers manifest during enrollment and influence adult learners' academic engagement and success. External demands and institutional structure may limit adult learners' opportunities to sustain engagement in the classroom, and stress and self-doubts wear away at a student's self-

confidence, especially over time. Similar to the articles above, this process leads to a delay in a student's academic progress rather than an immediate stop-out (Saunders, 2019). It's important to note that, in the study, the barriers mentioned above led to a lack of academic engagement, increased stress, and difficulty sustaining consistent enrollment (Saunders, 2019).

The findings from this study are in agreement with Osam's (2016) identification of systematic barriers and with Kouassi's (2023) emphasis on stop-out behaviors, which illustrated how ongoing exposure to barriers during enrollment contributes to disturbances in these learners' education. These studies show that adult learner retention challenges develop through sustained institutional misalignment rather than a lack of motivation or commitment.

Overall, the literature on adult learner retention and persistence suggests that issues related to degree completion are hardly the result of motivational deficiencies. In reality, research conducted by Osam et al. (2016), Kouassi (2023), and Saunders (2019) supports that multiple situational, institutional, and dispositional barriers accumulate over time, culminating in delayed progress and dropouts. This confirms that interruptions in adult learner enrollment are deliberately implemented to alleviate the buildup of outside influences. Adult learner dropouts, therefore, can be seen as an outcome of an enduring institutional-level misalignment.

Equity and Marginalization of Adult Learners

Previous research on adult learners has focused on aspects of equity in their experiences. The first study examined institutional accountability and argued that inequity in higher education is commonly the result of systemic shortcomings in policy, practice, and resource allocation rather than students' shortcomings (Bensimon, 2007). The research also revealed that when institutions monitor equity outcomes and implement intervention methods, they can help minimize marginalization and increase persistence among adult learners and other

underrepresented groups (Bensimon, 2007). When looking at this viewpoint, we see the emphasis on the importance of equity, not just simply a matter of fact, but rather it is about the institutional commitment to make those changes that take adult learners into consideration.

In the article by Chick, Morello, and Vance (2025), the authors build on a similar theory to Bensimon's, that equity does not require deficit-based explanations of student outcomes, but instead, the concept of institutional accountability. The authors furthered the argument by considering the concept of equity and how it can be operationalized through instructional design (Chick et al., 2025). In their study, they adopted Universal Design for Learning to examine how typical instruction may create several barriers for adult learners (Chick et al., 2025). Further, their study revealed that institutions may accommodate the needs of adult learners when Universal Design for Learning is incorporated into a much larger policy agenda (Chick et al., 2025). What ties these two studies together is that they show how critical it is to recognize that the marginalization of adult learners is a function of more extensive system-level issues.

In the two pieces of work, Bensimon (2007) and Chick et al. (2025) clarify that there needs to be a shift in the explanations for student success to focus on institutional accountability. What is laid out in these studies and in the policies and practices they describe is how they can lead to the marginalization of adult learners if equity is not considered. This part of the literature explains that the opportunity for institutional design to counteract marginalization and help adult learners persists. In other words, the concept of equity is about institutional design and has clear effects on the success of adult learners.

To wrap this up, previous literature concludes that adult learners' experiences, motivation, persistence, and sense of belonging are determined not by individual characteristics but through institutional structures. Through decades of literature, institutional culture, policies,

and responsiveness have emerged as major contributors that either limit or nurture adult learners in higher education. While past studies have shown evidence of the challenges adult learners face, more recent studies examine the intersections of identity, equity, and institutional accountability within the landscape of higher education today. This gap in the literature suggests that additional research is needed that places adult learners' lived experiences at the forefront and carefully examines institutional practices that cause marginalization.

Analysis

Theories

This section will present several theories closely related to the themes seen throughout the literature review: institutional flexibility, motivation/goal-oriented learning, and adult learner identity, belonging, and lived experiences. The four theories that align closely with this paper are: Knowles' Theory of Andragogy, the Self-Determination Theory (SDT), the Theory of Student Involvement, and the Expectancy-Value Theory. Throughout the next few pages, each theory will be discussed, and following that, we will look at them through different perspectives, student, institutional, and policy, and how the theories relate to the different perspectives.

Knowles Theory of Andragogy

Malcolm Knowles's Theory of Andragogy (1980) views adult learners as self-directed learners whose real-life experiences are legitimate sources of knowledge. Unlike other educational theories, andragogy often rejects the idea of learner dependence and instead bases adult education on autonomy, relevance, and problem-solving (Knowles, 1980). This theory shifts control of instruction from institutional control to a collaborative process between the learner and the instructor.

Self-Determination Theory (SDT)

The Self-Determination Theory, developed by Deci and Ryan (2000), argues that motivation, personality development, and optimal functioning can be understood through three basic needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Autonomy is the ability to make one's own decisions; competence reflects the need to feel successful in attaining goals; and relatedness describes the feeling of belonging to others (Deci & Ryan, 2000). According to this theory, when these three needs are satisfied, an individual is more likely to be intrinsically motivated and engaged in whatever they are doing (in this case, school). On the other hand, when these needs are not satisfied, the individual becomes externally motivated.

Theory of Student Involvement

Alexander Astin's Theory of Student Involvement (1984) proposes that student learning and persistence are related to the degree to which students invest physical and psychological energy in their educational experiences. Student involvement in this case refers to the time and effort students invest in their educational experience, such as studying, interacting with faculty, and participating in campus activities. According to this theory, the quality of involvement also affects educational outcomes, and institutions play a role because student success is shaped not only by individual motivation but also by the opportunities for involvement that schools provide (Astin, 1984).

Expectancy-Value Theory

The Expectancy-Value Theory by Jacquelynne Eccles and Allan Wigfield (2002) argues that motivation to perform a task is influenced by an individual's expectation of success and the

perceived value of the task (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002). Ultimately, if a person believes they can succeed and finds a task important, they may be more likely to put forth effort, especially if it benefits them. The Expectancy-Value Theory provides a framework for understanding how motivation is shaped by perceived capability and the evaluation of potential outcomes.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs argues that human motivation is organized through a progression of needs, starting with the physiological and safety needs and moving towards belonging, esteem, and finally self-actualization needs (Maslow, 1943). Maslow's (1943) theory further argues that people are not able to think about self-actualization needs if their basic needs are not fulfilled. Briefly, thinking about this from an educational standpoint, this can refer to external factors such as financial obligations, family responsibilities, and even employment, all of which may influence the student's ability to fully engage in their schooling. Due to this, motivation may not be solely an internal characteristic but rather something shaped by whether institutional environments support or hinder students' ability to meet these underlying needs.

Themes

Institutional Inflexibility

In the literature review, institutional inflexibility emerged as a factor shaping adult learners' academic engagement and persistence. Although the expansion of online education is often presented as a solution for non-traditional students, flexibility in delivery format does not necessarily translate into flexibility in institutional design (Lee, 2017; Ross-Gordon, 2011). For adult learners who re-enter higher education after an extended time off, challenges such as

technological adaptation, academic writing expectations, and time management can be hard to juggle, especially with rigid program sequencing, standardized deadlines, and limited academic responsiveness (Sogunro, 2015). From a student perspective, these structures do not just create inconvenience; they can reshape the learner's role within the educational environment.

Knowles' Theory of Andragogy fits in perfectly with this theme and the student perspective. Institutional inflexibility is not a structural constraint but rather a fundamental disconnect from the andragogy principles. In Knowles' model of andragogy, adult learners are seen as autonomous individuals with the ability to control their own educational trajectory, yet institutional structure and design have a way of re-centering control and authority through a rigid framework of curriculum and time sequence, with little consideration for the value of experiential learning as a foundation for academic pursuit (Knowles, 1980). By doing this, the school affirms instructional control paradigms that view the learner as compliant with institutional structure, rather than a co-constructor of knowledge and meaning. With this, institutional inflexibility does not just limit the learner's ability to schedule their academic experience, but also redefines their role within the academic environment from an autonomous learner to a subject of academic structure and design.

This theme also has some implications that could connect to Self-Determination Theory (SDT). Institutional inflexibility compromises competence by failing to validate learners' experiences. As a result, adult learners may face motivational strains, not because of a lack of commitment, but because they are unable to fulfill their psychological needs due to inflexibility (Deci & Ryan, 2000). If this motivational strain occurs, it's important that it not be seen as the student's fault, but as a structural misalignment between the university's structure and the ability to support adult learners' needs (Bean & Metzner, 1985). When considered through the lens of

Self-Determination Theory, responsibility shifts away from the learner and towards a fundamental change, as motivation is influenced by environmental conditions rather than solely by individual traits (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Therefore, institutional design is key in sustaining adult learner motivation and persistence.

From an institutional standpoint, inflexibility often stems from structures designed for traditional students. Many institutions may value operational efficiency, full-time enrollment models, and standardized scheduling; however, these priorities often conflict with the needs of adult learners. Alexander Astin's Theory of Student Involvement aligns with this perspective by highlighting that learning increases with engagement, despite institutional designs/policies that limit access (such as online flexibility), which, in turn, reduce an adult learner's ability to be involved (Astin, 1984). That said, by conducting matters this way, institutions may be unintentionally harming the success of adult learners.

From a policy perspective, we can consider policy measures that often reward full-time students and traditional progression patterns. Bean and Metzner's (1985) model argues that the persistence of non-traditional students is influenced by environmental factors, many of which, in turn, are affected by institutional and funding policies. An example of this is if state and federal funding policies limit the amount of financial aid available to part-time students, or if a deadline is set for degree completion. As a result, part-time adult learners are placed at a significant disadvantage.

Overall, institutional inflexibility is across the student, institutional, and policy levels as a structural condition that redefines an adult learner's motivation and sense of belonging. When considered through a theoretical framework, this inflexibility is a force that can influence the extent to which an adult learner can participate in higher education. To address the issue of adult

learner persistence, it is not simply individual support structures that must be considered; it is the transformation at the institution and policy levels.

Motivation and Goal-Oriented Learning

Another theme emerging in the literature is the intrinsic and extrinsic motivation of adult learners regarding career development, financial stability, and personal development. From a student perspective, adult learners may choose to go to school because it could potentially mean better job opportunities, more money, or growth in their chosen career. Adult students may also have a specific goal in mind when they choose to attend college, such as changing their occupation or providing financial security for their families. In this way, their choice to attend college is often seen as a calculated choice rather than an exploratory one.

Expectancy-Value Theory can be applied to this type of motivation. According to Eccles and Wigfield (2002), a person's motivation is determined by their expectancy of success and the value they place on the task, including its benefit and cost. From the adult learner's perspective, if they see a connection between their coursework and career goals, value increases, and motivation strengthens. On the other hand, motivation may decrease when the perceived costs, such as time constraints or financial costs, outweigh the benefits (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002).

From an institutional perspective, universities that create experimental learning opportunities and flexible scheduling are more likely to align with adult learners' motivations and goals. Deci & Ryan (2000) support this, as their study found that autonomy-supportive contexts, which emphasize application and development, enhance intrinsic motivation and participation, especially when the relevance of education to career development is clear. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs can relate to the theme by giving insight into the impact of basic

needs on academic motivation. The motivation an adult learner has is often seen as an internal characteristic driven by career opportunities, financial stability, or personal satisfaction. However, when viewed through Maslow's theory, motivation can be linked to institutional structures rather than simply an individual's drive. Often, adult learners return to school while navigating various external factors (such as employment, childcare, etc.).

Furthering the institutional perspective, universities may assume students already have a sense of belonging and self-esteem, which, in turn, could mean the school is unintentionally ignoring the basic needs for a positive learning experience to take place (Maslow, 1943). Bean and Metzner's (1985) study is closely related to the same concept: factors such as financial stability and external commitments play an important role in adult learners' persistence. Campuses that offer more accessible advising, career counseling, and financial aid can help address the needs of adult learners regarding stability and achievement (Bean & Metzner, 1985). If institutions support the needs of adult learners, they may be able to build a more supportive environment that sustains motivation and persistence among these students.

While institutional practices shape students' academic lives, state and federal policies set the structural context for goal-oriented learning. Adult students tend to be part-time and pursue an education while working and tending to family obligations (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2023). However, most policies to date regarding financial aid focus on full-time enrollment rather than part-time enrollment. Bean and Metzner (1985) suggest that environmental factors, such as financial and employment conditions, have a strong impact on the persistence of non-traditional students.

With current financial aid policies limiting eligibility for part-time students, barriers may be created that could potentially jeopardize a student's ability to achieve their goals. If an adult

learner experiences financial hardships due to a lack of financial aid, they may become less motivated to finish their degree or even return to school. In these situations, reduced persistence should not be interpreted as a lack of commitment, but rather as a reflection of policy conditions that shape the feasibility of educational goals (Bean & Metzner, 1985). Overall, adult learner motivation must be conceptualized in a multi-level perspective that takes into account the difficulties at play between individual motivation, institutional supportiveness, and policy conditions.

Adult Learner Identity, Belonging, and Lived Experiences

A third major theme highlighted in the literature above is the importance of identity, sense of belonging, and lived experiences among adult learners. While both institutional structures and the dynamics of motivation are important in determining adult learner persistence, the literature above proves that identity, belonging, and experiences are equally important. Adult learners do not enter higher education seeking to form an identity; rather, they return to school with an established identity developed through professional and family roles (Knowles, 1980). This is a critical point we will see, especially from the student perspective.

From a student perspective, and as mentioned above, adult learners enter higher education as individuals who have already formed their own identities through professional lives, families, and life experiences (Knowles, 1980). Unlike traditional students, adult learners return to school with their identity already in place and feel they have a sense of purpose. Though this can be either a strength or a weakness for adult learners while on their educational journey. The identities these students bring may reflect the confidence they have gained from life experiences. Many adult learners may draw on experiences from their lives to build confidence; however,

they may also experience identity dissonance when navigating the higher education setting, which is typically structured around traditional students (Tinto, 1993).

The Theory of Andragogy can also be tied into this piece to provide a deeper understanding. The main idea behind this theory and how it relates is that adult learners have expectations going into higher education that their experiences will be validated. When faculty members incorporate real-life experiences, adult learners are more likely to feel validated in their identity rather than marginalized. However, when institutions use teaching methods that disregard experience and treat adult learners as inexperienced, then tension with their identity may become apparent (Deci & Ryan, 2000). When this happens, it may make the learner question their expertise and even sense of belonging.

The Self-Determination also supports this claim of belonging, given its emphasis on relatedness as a basic psychological need (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Relatedness is defined as the feeling of being connected, respected, and valued by others (Deci & Ryan, 2000). For adult learners, if they feel invisible in an educational setting, their sense of "connection" may be compromised, which can ultimately affect motivation and persistence. The feeling of belonging is definitely a work in progress with adult learners.

From an institutional perspective, universities play an important role in shaping whether adult learners experience a sense of identity affirmation or marginalization. As indicated above, although adult learners bring a sense of self from their professional lives and overall experiences, the educational setting is most often designed with traditional-aged students in mind. When the institutional culture is designed under the assumption that students are residential and full-time, adult students may find themselves out of sync with it.

Knowles' Theory of Andragogy highlights that adult learners expect their experiences to be validated as learning resources (Knowles, 1980). When faculty integrate experiential, discussion-based, and reflective learning, they are showing respect for the identity of adult learners (Knowles, 1980). On the other hand, if an institution's teaching style focuses on standard teaching methods without considering learners' prior experiences, adult learners might view their work and personal experiences as of little worth (Tinto, 1993).

Institutional climate can also affect a sense of belonging through academic and social integration. Tinto (1993) argues that the extent to which students feel a part of the academic and social settings affects persistence. However, it's important to note that, for an adult learner, integration may not be based solely on campus social life, but rather on academic engagement, faculty recognition, and even institutional responsiveness. The bigger picture here is that if a faculty member recognizes adult learners' responsibilities and creates structures for flexible learning, these students may be more likely to view themselves as legitimate members of the academic community and ultimately feel a sense of belonging.

From a policy perspective, the identity and sense of belonging of adult learners are shaped by how higher education systems define the "traditional" college student. As seen throughout, categories of reporting, funding, and accountability often revolve around full-time, first-time, degree-seeking students (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2023). When the measure of institutional success focuses on continuous enrollment and on-time program completion, adult learners in non-traditional enrollment situations may become invisible within policy discourse (Bean & Metzner, 1985).

There are many issues that are far greater than funding and access, as they influence identity legitimacy. When policy language and accountability systems imply a preference for

traditional enrollment patterns, the adult learner may view themselves as peripheral to the institution's traditional mission (Bean & Metzner, 1985). This model further stressed that non-traditional students are influenced by environmental factors quite different from those of traditional students. This perspective suggests that policy environments must also recognize these differences rather than simply measure adult learners against the typical benchmark.

Looking at this through a broader perspective, when colleges show that they recognize and include all students, those students are more likely to feel a sense of recognition and inclusion. If there are policies that recognize part-time enrollment, re-entry, prior learning assessment, and competency-based education, this will send a message that adult learners are not exceptions to the rule but are an integral part of the campus community. On the other hand, when policy structures do not recognize the diversity of educational experiences, they can potentially send a message that reinforces marginalization. In this sense, policy operates not only as a regulatory mechanism but as a force that shapes who is seen and valued in higher education (Bean & Metzner, 1985).

The themes of institutional inflexibility, motivation and goal-oriented learning, and identity and belonging reveal that adult learner persistence cannot be narrowed down to individual effort alone. The student, institutional, and policy perspectives support the idea that adult learner success is rooted in the structural conditions that inform learner autonomy, legitimacy, and access. Further, when institutions primarily cater to the needs of traditional-aged, full-time students, adult learners may experience misalignment that affects not only their academic performance but also their sense of belonging and long-term persistence (Bean & Metzner, 1985). As a result, adult learner success must be viewed as a multi-level system defined by interactions between individual motivation and university structures. This sets the stage for

exploring the larger ethical issues that inform the structures that govern the higher education system, structures that may unintentionally marginalize a growing student population.

Ethical Implications

If the needs of adult learners are not addressed, the world of higher education can face severe consequences that affect individual students and colleges. As noted above, adult learners often juggle several responsibilities, including full-time employment, caring for families, and managing household finances. Students face these responsibilities while managing school, which can increase stress. If schools fail to recognize these realities of adult learners, whether by inflexible schedules and lack of financial aid for part-time students' adult learners are at a true disadvantage compared to their younger students. For adult learners, pursuing higher education usually offers more opportunities, whether personal or professional; however, when institutions are designed to support traditional-aged students, this poses an issue.

The first major area of ethical implication is the lack of educational equity. The most important piece of this concern is that, for there to truly be change, institutions need to acknowledge that not all students have the same needs and take the necessary steps to ensure a positive outcome for adult learners. When adult learners are expected to follow strict, structured courses and support services designed for more traditional students, the realities of adult learners are overlooked, leaving them at a disadvantage. If these disadvantages remain unaddressed, higher education institutions may end up continuing with the existing social structures.

The next ethical concern is ensuring that adult learners make well-informed decisions. Many adult learners are motivated to return to school to better themselves and grow in their careers. Though these students truly may not know what they are getting themselves into

financially and time-wise. Making an informed decision can be difficult, especially when students are primarily focused on advancing their careers rather than on financial considerations. Students often commit major financial resources without fully comprehending the potential consequences, such as long-term debt. This raises ethical issues: adult students may commit considerable financial resources without complete information. These students need to understand before they even apply to their programs and have as much information as possible to ensure they are choosing the best option for themselves.

There are also ethical consequences regarding the sense of inclusion among adult learners. These types of students often feel invisible, stigmatized, or treated as outliers in the academic community (Kasworm, 2010). Kasworm (2010) argued that institutional cultures that frame adult learners as "nontraditional" rather than as integral contributors to the learning environment can weaken a learner's sense of legitimacy and self-worth. Ethical educational environments must take into consideration the value of all learners, and failing to do so can compromise moral commitments to respect, human dignity, and inclusion.

Ethical implications in higher education go far beyond access and finances; they also include the psychological and social well-being of adult learners. Due to the age difference between adult learners and their peers, adult learners may feel isolated and unable to relate to them (Kasworm, 2010). Additionally, adult learners may feel stressed and a lack of self-confidence if they perceive that their institution is not including or supporting them as much as their traditional peers. If we incorporate ethical approaches in higher education, it would be extremely beneficial to focus on respect and equity for all students.

Policy Recommendations

Addressing the differences between the needs of adult learners and existing higher education policies demands intentional, systemic institutional-level policy reform. Policy recommendations must be grounded in the literature on adult learning, student success, and equality. The recommendations are designed to promote degree completion and persistence among adult learners in higher education. The policy recommendations proposed also aim to address the ethical and systemic inequities identified in this paper.

One recommendation is that colleges and universities adopt institution-wide policies that acknowledge adult learners as a key population rather than a nontraditional group. By including adult learners in colleges' missions and strategic plans for student success, there can be better alignment of academic and support services to support adult learners' success. Past research suggests that designing policies that address the needs of adult learners benefits colleges by strengthening engagement and retention (Ross-Gordon, 2011). Building a welcoming campus is a key piece, and it can be started here by acknowledging adult learners.

Another recommendation is that institutions should also implement flexible guidelines that allow adult learners to learn in multiple ways. These policies should include expanding programs/classes to run in the evenings, offering fully online classes, and, if necessary, weekend classes. Flexible course delivery has been found to positively impact persistence among working adults (Merriam & Bierema, 2014). It is also recommended to reassess attendance and leave-of-absence policies that take into account the needs of those with many responsibilities (caregiving, health issues, and employment disruption).

The third recommendation under institutional policies is that colleges should expand policies related to prior learning assessment. Prior learning assessment is a great option for adult

learners as it allows them to receive course credit for real-life relevant experiences (work, certifications, or military training). Prior learning assessment also allows adult learners to cut down the duration of the program they are in. According to the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL, 2019), adult learners who earn prior learning assessment credits have higher completion rates than students who do not transfer in these credits.

A significant recommendation for adult learners is to find ways to make college more affordable. Financial barriers play a key role in an adult learner's decisions to enroll in higher education (Kasworm et al., 2002). According to Goldrick-Rab (2016), current financial aid systems are informed by a model of uninterrupted, full-time enrollment, ultimately favoring students who follow it. For working adults, this may exacerbate their financial vulnerability, increasing the risk of dropping out of college as they may face limited access to grants and loans (Kasworm et al., 2002). In order for any change to occur, these financial barriers must be addressed at the institutional level and through federal policy reform of financial aid criteria. At the federal level, policymakers should revise the criteria for financial assistance to better align with enrollment patterns among adult students.

Another recommendation is for institutions to adopt data-driven policies to improve accountability and equity for adult learners. By utilizing student success metrics that separate status, age, and life circumstances, school administrators can identify gaps in retention and completion rates (NCES, 2023). By including adult learner metrics in institutional review assessments, adult learner issues are addressed to determine whether the institutional strategy is effective in serving adult students (Kasworm, 2002). Integrating adult learner success strategies with Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion is critical, as it recognizes the distinct challenges adult

students face, especially parents, military personnel, and those of other races (Ross-Gordon, 2011).

Another important recommendation is to hold an orientation for adult learners for all incoming students. Nowadays, many schools hold orientation sessions for their students, though adult learners may perceive these as unnecessary or irrelevant. Requiring attendance at this type of event can help address the gap of feeling like they do not belong. For example, an event like this can help students make meaningful connections with their peers who share similar life experiences and educational goals. These connections not only provide social and academic support to adult learners but may also increase retention and persistence throughout their programs.

The final recommendation is to create more activities, clubs, and engagement opportunities geared toward adult learners. Many universities already offer opportunities for involvement for different student populations. For example, Marywood University has a Graduate Council, which is a great opportunity for graduate students to be involved. This reach should be expanded to adult learners, as it can provide valuable opportunities for involvement and representation of this population. Without a doubt, increased access to these types of organizations can strengthen an adult learner's sense of belonging and community.

The recommendations help point to the true need for alignment between institutional and federal policies within the lived experiences of adult learners. By incorporating flexible learning, prior learning recognition, accessible financial aid, data-driven accountability, and opportunities for engagement, institutions can shift from merely accommodating adult learners to truly supporting them. With the implementation of these strategies, I hope institutions can not only

eliminate structural barriers but also foster a sense of legitimacy, belonging, and empowerment among adult learners so they can thrive.

Summary

This paper argued that the challenges are also embedded in the structural and cultural assumptions of higher education institutions. Although situational and dispositional challenges have been addressed in the literature, analyses of these challenges have emphasized the defining role of institutional arrangements in adult learners' experiences. The enrollment patterns, time of completion, and sequencing of the curriculum have, in many instances, been determined with the traditional model of students in mind. This implies that adult learners must conform to the institution's requirements, rather than the institution conforming to those of contemporary learners.

The literature review provided a comprehensive overview of prior research on adult learners. It began with an introduction of the historical frameworks that create barriers for adult learners in higher education. The research pieces discussed were identified as the main contributors to the problem of adult learners. The barriers included situational, institutional, and dispositional factors as the core problems for adult learners. Situational barriers are those that place multiple demands on the learner, such as work and family; institutional barriers are policies that restrict flexibility; and dispositional barriers reflect the student’s confidence and perceptions (Cross, 1981).

Building on this, the literature on the learner’s identity, a sense of belonging, and the learner’s experience stressed the role of the institutional culture in creating the legitimacy and inclusion of the adult learners. The perceived sense of belonging of adult learners in the higher

education community is also an important consideration in the study of adult learners. Throughout, it has been noted that the institutional environment may implicitly suggest to the adult learner that their position in the academic community is marginal to the institution's main mission and purpose. Belonging in the higher education environment is not simply the result of the interactions with their peers, but is also supported and reinforced through the institutional policies and practices that either acknowledge or ignore the experience of the adult learner. If institutional culture does not mirror the diversity of the learners in its own experiences, it may create an environment in which the adult learner feels like just another number without being included as an asset of the institution.

The theories explored in this paper further highlight the misalignment of adult learners in higher education. Knowles' Theory of Andragogy emphasizes that adult learners are autonomous individuals whose lived experiences are crucial to the learning process. However, the institution's inflexibility may not allow the adult learner to express their autonomy and lived experiences in their academic journey. Therefore, the institution's inflexibility not only creates logistical issues but also affects the concept of adult learners in the academic environment.

Further, the Self-Determination Theory stressed the significance of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in maintaining motivation. Adult learners in higher education often begin with strong internal motivations to improve career prospects, enhance self-esteem, and/or improve economic well-being. However, environments that lack flexibility and/or do not value experiential learning can undermine the motivational foundation. Persistence is no longer solely the individual's capacity to carry on but the degree to which the environment accommodates these motivational foundations.

Throughout the various lenses of the student, the institution, and the policy levels explored in this paper, there was a clear and consistent thread: the marginalization of the adult learner was not simply an individual-level issue but was instead part of a larger misalignment between the structure of schools and the lived experiences of adult learners. These institutions often measured success in terms of enrollment and progress, but adult learners' lives were out of the ordinary due to the demands of work and family, as well as financial constraints.

Ultimately, this paper suggests that the growing presence of adult learners in higher education challenges long-standing assumptions about who higher education is designed to serve. As demographic shifts continue to reshape the student population, the tension between traditional institutional models and the needs of adult learners becomes increasingly visible. Addressing this tension requires not only expanding access but also reconsidering the structural frameworks that define participation, progress, and success. In this case, adult learners do not represent a marginal group within higher education, but rather an evolving center of its future. If higher education institutions recognize this shift, it will not only affect the experiences of adult learners but also the nature of higher education itself.

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