THIRD SHIFT LABOR OF ADVANCED-CAREER LEARNERS: GROWING THE ADULT EDUCATION FIELD

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the literature on advanced-career adult learners pursuing graduate education on the "third shift", which begins after daily work and family obligations are completed (Kramarae, 2001, p. 3). The purpose is to explain the unique characteristics of these learners and the ways in which educators can offer support so they are successful and able to return to practice as adult educators themselves to grow the field of adult education.

Keywords: third shift, advanced-career, graduate education.

INTRODUCTION

There are significant obstacles that advanced-career students face. Distance education has provided a unique view of the "[m]any women [who] balance job, community, and heavy family responsibilities against their academic work" (Kramarae, 2001). Online courses allow them the opportunity to participate in asynchronous course assignments late at night, on their "third shift" after they have spent the day in the workplace and managed their family responsibilities from the end of their work day through late evening. The majority of online students are women (Gnanadass & Sanders, 2019); however, women also seek face-to-face opportunities to continue their education, which can add obstacles such as securing time off from work, handling difficult childcare arrangements, and juggling family tasks within an already constricted timeframe.

Despite facing significant obstacles, advanced-career learners in graduate programs have much to offer (Day, Lovato, Tull, & Ross-Gordon, 2011; Swain & Hammond, 2011; Willans & Seary, 2011). They bring vast life experience and real-world knowledge that may be lacking in younger students, including collaborative skills, a robust knowledge base, role model status, effective communication and group organization skills, high motivation, and often strong academic skills. Their unique perspectives can bring valuable knowledge and awareness of connections to the field. Advanced-career learners offer role-modeling in terms of excitement about and motivation for learning, a desire for generativity, good academic habits/skills, and resilience in the face of academic and life challenges. Faculty have described these adult learners as:

> more committed to their education, more focused, and harder working … more persistent, more tenacious, and more dedicated … [with] abilities to multitask, to juggle their many life roles … to devote themselves to study, [although] specific study skills and confidence in the classroom might be lacking. (Day et al., 2011, p. 79)

Advanced-career learners have a deeper understanding that perfection is not realistic or required, despite the challenges or fears they may experience (Scott, Burns, & Cooney, 1996).

There is a need to recognize the resilience and value to the learning environment of seasoned professionals entering doctoral study, to understand the challenges, and to assist them in

overcoming obstacles. This paper will explore ways in which doctoral programs can better support this population, including through advising practices, enhanced assessment, awareness of third shift learners' challenges, and flexible learning environments. Recognizing the "multidimensionality of learning - physical, cognitive, emotional" (Willans & Seary, 2011) is significant for adult education. There is potential to enhance adult education programs by acknowledging the value of advanced-career students in lifelong learning programs at the highest academic level.

ADVANCED-CAREER THIRD SHIFT LEARNER CHARACTERISTICS

The characteristics of advanced-career learners reflect "the world of work, community engagement, parenting, travel and other life experiences" (Willans & Seary, 2011, p. 120). They often represent varied views of lifelong learning and may have developed diverse coping strategies based on their schooling, work, and personal experiences. The emotions they face returning to school run the gamut from fear to a sense of empowerment. They may experience stress and disorientation, yet they may also find fulfillment in accomplishment (Hensley & Kinser, 2001; Willans & Seary, 2011). Their community and work experience may have enhanced their interpersonal skills and strengthened their ability to handle multiple tasks simultaneously. Their knowledge and skills accumulated over a longer lifetime can contribute to deeper and more diverse cross-generational learning, enriching the experience for others (Day et al., 2011; Ellis, 2013). Their academic motivations may be different than younger graduate students and this, coupled with their station in life, can add diversity to the program.

Advanced-career graduate students may offer perspectives that differ from traditional doctoral candidates. Their age influences their desire for generativity, and their experiences affect their level of resilience and persistence. Advanced-career learners returning to academic settings may have attained a comfortable constancy in their work and personal lives, yet they may also seek to avoid torpidity; "they need both change and stability for personal growth" (Willans & Seary, 2007, p. 120), reflective of Erickson's Generativity versus Stagnation stage of development (Erikson, 1950; Slater, 2003). For advanced-career learners, "family networks, peer relationships, relationships with teachers and commitment to learning represent components through which resiliency can be promoted. More specifically, strengths such as self-concept, self-control, cultural sensitivity, empowerment, social sensitivity and empathy provide important internal strengths" (Willans & Seary, 2011, p. 128). Persistence is needed to successfully complete graduate studies. Having the tenacity to continue through a doctoral program despite barriers is a significant factor for advanced-career learners (Fung, Southcott, & Siu, 2017). Having prior experience balancing work and family can be beneficial for these learners as they may rely on established family and colleague support networks. Work experience may also have provided skills such as the ability to prioritize, maintain determination, and recognize the benefits of their challenging endeavors.

CHALLENGES AND SUPPORT NEEDS

As with all doctoral students, advanced-career learners must be able to balance aspects of their lives including work, family, academics, and research in order to be successful. However, it is also important to be aware of the anxieties and needs specific to this population. Self-doubt is a significant obstacle for advanced-career learners, and social support from family, friends, and faculty is vital to alleviate debilitating stress (Carney-

Crompton & Tan, 2002; Fung et al., 2017; Quimby & O'Brien, 2006; Scott et al., 1996; van Rhijn, 2012; van Rhijn, Lero, Bridge, & Fritz, 2016). A lack of self-confidence is "one of the most common causes of anxiety for mature-age learners" (Willans & Seary, 2011, p. 133). It can be difficult to go back to school when one has been away from formal classroom learning and out of practice of analytical reading, writing, and studying.

Advanced-career learners face significant challenges in doctoral programs including a lack of familiarity with institutional practices and expectations, an uncertainty in how to approach social relationships with classmates who may be significantly younger, academic difficulties from rusty skills, inability to effectively access resources, and management of the multitude of life responsibilities outside of academic study (Kasworm, 2010; Michie, Glachan, & Bray, 2001; Perna, 2010; van Rhijn et al., 2016; Willans & Seary, 2011). Technology, academic research, and writing are areas where advanced-career learners may require specific support; flexibility in addressing challenges faced by these learners is important as it has an impact on retention (Ellis, 2013). These students can face the "bombardment [of] financial constraints, job and family commitments, confusing institutional practices and protocols, and a perceived or very real lack of family support" (Willans & Seary, 2011, p. 129).

Flexible funding resources can assist advanced-career learners facing limited financial resources due to the need to lessen work hours despite maintaining financial burdens. Part-time graduate assistantships, money for adjunct teaching, access to shared/used departmental texts, and information on the availability of scholarships, as well as advising on the application processes, can make a difference for some students. As advanced-career learners "struggle with accessing needed resources, supports, services, and flexible study options" (van Rhijn et al., 2016, p. 29), programs need to be attentive to these challenges.

Advanced-career learners need effective mentoring (Hansman, 2016, 2017; Malin & Hackmann, 2016; Paglis, Green, & Bauert, 2006; Schroeder & Terras, 2015). Programs should assess faculty member effectiveness not only in instruction, but also in advising (Schroeder & Terras, 2015). To retain advanced-career learners, programs need to ensure their social integration within the institution, and mentoring is important to the socialization process (Hansman, 2017; Malin & Hackmann, 2016; Paglis et al., 2006; van Rhijn et al., 2016). Doctoral students' perceptions of advising often reflects their personal relationship with their advisor and their participation in selecting an academic advisor; an effective relationship with an academic advisor is crucial for the success of doctoral students during their academic careers (Barnes, Williams, & Archer, 2010). Learners who complete their programs have "described more positive interactions with their dissertation chair than did noncompleters" (Barnes et al., 2010, p.36). A positive working relationship between academic advisors and advanced-career doctoral students goes beyond trivial advising such as guidance on completing paperwork, and it includes maintaining a quality mentoring relationship that is open, honest, and supportive. Advisors must also be accessible given the time constraints faced by advanced-career learners.

It is often difficult for advanced-career learners to balance "their multiple roles and responsibilities and [they can] experience social exclusion as non-traditional students, feeling that they are not understood by their peers or institutions" (van Rhijn et al., 2016, p. 29). One significant difficulty with multiple responsibilities is that diminishing time spent in one area in order to add the role of student without being able to eliminate another role makes it difficult for these students to achieve at a high level in all roles; "[b]eing a student took time

and energy away from other responsibilities (including families and paid employment) while those other responsibilities took time away from their school responsibilities" (van Rhijn et al., 2016, p. 38). Increased stress and exhaustion from taking on so many roles can make it difficult for students to succeed (Wheeler & Eichelberger, 2017). To effectively support advanced-career learners, programs need to examine policies and practices to ensure flexibility, they need to promote social support networks for students, and they need to offer needed financial aid (van Rhijn et al., 2016).

RECRUITING, RETAINING, AND GRADUATING ADVANCED-CAREER LEARNERS

While large research institutions may rely on their well-known status and wait for students to come to them rather than overtly recruiting new students, there are ways for adult education programs to successfully recruit advanced-career learners. Traditional recruitment approaches may reflect structurally steeped patterns that are difficult to change, yet targeted messaging, recognizing optimal recruitment windows, and promoting program aspects that are especially appealing to advanced-career learners can be beneficial (Wheeler & Eichelberger, 2017). It is important to reach out to these learners when they are most receptive to starting graduate study: when they recognize a need for greater knowledge and additional skills or when they are considering a career change. If a graduate program does not enroll part-timers who are already in the workforce, this may exclude a population that would be excellent potential candidates for doctoral study. The only advanced-career students would then be individuals who could afford to attend full-time, either by quitting their job or taking a leave of absence from work.

Targeting learners in the workforce, particularly those already employed in some capacity in the field of education, can be accomplished through professional development workshops, webinars promoted through professional and community organizations, contacts with research centers, communication with professional organizations, posting on professional websites and advertisements or article contributions to professional publications (Sutton, 2018; Wheeler & Eichelberger, 2017). Since advanced-career learners face challenges balancing life commitments, emphasizing online courses, flexible scheduling, part-time options, and funding resources can assure students that their academic study can be managed effectively. It is important to acknowledge that while obtaining tenure-track faculty positions may be the assumed goal for many doctoral students, it is not the only goal. These learners may also choose to undertake graduate study because they are interested in particular career moves; providing detailed information on the differences between practical and research degrees that affect employment opportunities can be helpful (Wheeler & Eichelberger, 2017).

While there are benefits for students, family members, work colleagues and society when advanced-career learners pursue graduate study, "not all who commence a late course of study complete it and many discontinue before graduation" (Scott et al., 1996). Mature students with non-traditional backgrounds, family responsibilities, and work obligations who are not fully integrated into the institution are more likely to drop out than younger students living on campus (Edirisingha, 2009). For programs to increase diversity by recruiting advanced-career learners, they must acknowledge the unique obstacles these students face and address them through program flexibility and strong mentoring. These students reported that:

They felt unsupported by university staff and found that study made heavy practical demands, such as finding the time to get to the library or the computing centre.... [and] older participants' motives for return to study grew out of a desire to pursue learning for learning's sake in areas of personal interest. The experience of being forced to proceed lockstep through courses designed for school leavers was frustrating, as was the expectation that they would "toe the [lecturers'] party line 'rather than being able to read widely and pursue topics of personal interest." (Scott et al., 1996)

If adult education programs are interested in retaining valuable qualified advanced-career learners, they must prepare their faculty to work with these learners and provide means to overcome inaccessibility, skill deficits, financial barriers, stress, and weak advising (Rogers, 2018).

IMPACT ON THE FIELD

After completing adult education programs, advanced-career learners move on to successful second careers, which will grow the field of adult education. They may become faculty peers, or pursue adult education practice in the community. Advanced-career learners who go on to second careers as educators are often unacknowledged as valuable resources despite providing significant applications of previous work experiences and demonstrating the transformative nature of education (Harmon, 2018). Advanced-career learners also have an enhanced awareness of and perspective on social values and social justice aims. By pursuing graduate study later in life, advanced-career learners exemplify, through their own choices and actions, adult educators' goals "to help people take control of their lives, exercise some kind of self- determination, and develop the self-confidence to promote some kind of activism" (Brookfield, 2016. p. 27). They "do not go into adult education for money, prestige, status or an easy life" (Brookfield, 2016. p. 27), and can often clearly see the intersections of social justice issues because of their previous work and life experiences.

Kelly (2007) found that mature students were more anxious about world-related issues rather than personal circumstances; they "would likely worry more about the greater good of society and the environment as well as trying to improve the conditions of these aspects for future generations" (p. 22). Advanced-career learners might have children whose future is tied to these learners' desire to make an impact. Pursuing a doctoral degree offers these individuals an opportunity for personal growth that will enable them to make further contributions to society. Waitoller and King Thorius (2016) described how the commitment of the field of adult education to critically reflexive praxis affirms and strengthens the social justice goals. Through cultivation of advanced-career doctoral students, and considering their need for support to enhance their success, the commitment of the field to critically reflexive praxis (Waitoller & King Thorius, 2016) and social justice will be affirmed and strengthened.

Advanced-career learners are role models within adult education programs; they can be "exceptional students who are very motivated and who perform well academically.... mature age students [go] on to establish rewarding and successful careers. Benefits other than career ones [include] increases in ability and confidence and in adherence to liberal social values" (Scott et al., 1996, p. 233), significant again to social justice aims. Advanced-career learners can exemplify the value of doctoral study through their motivation to pursue it at this point in their lives, the excitement of learning, and the value of life experience as a contributor to academic learning. By proactively addressing their specific needs and targeting them not just for admission, but also for participation in research, service, and departmental activities, adult educators can add value to their programs (van Rhijn et al., 2016).

CONCLUSION

There are several areas of academic study that would benefit from the knowledge of advanced-career learners due to their vast life experience, real world knowledge from the field, prior collaboration on work related teams employing group organization skills, role modeling, peer relationships with faculty members, and enhanced understanding of social justice. As advanced-career doctoral students, we have first-hand experience with the value mature students contribute to adult education programs, and we understand the obstacles they must overcome.

Collaboration between advanced-career learners and traditional graduate students is a significant benefit for adult education. As a retired English teacher, Carol was able to assist international students and native speakers with weaker academic writing skills through peer-to-peer tutoring. As university employees, Dorca and Tulare were able to enrich collaborative relationships by bringing work knowledge and an awareness of connections to the field that younger learners did not have. Our collaborative endeavors in classwork and research demonstrated the knowledge and skills we have obtained through our life work; these projects were effective and mutually beneficial for all students within the program.

Despite our contributions to our adult education program, we faced significant challenges. Dorca and Tulare both worked full-time while taking courses, and it became challenging to manage without much program support and flexibility. While Carol, facing a challenging course, and Dorca, requiring more hours to complete academic work as a first-generation immigrant, had similar obstacles to overcome, they found that program support was uneven; one professor arranged for independent study while another refused to allow online participation in class when work obligations prevented easy access to campus. Inconsistency in advising proved to be problematic for us as advisors changed frequently. It was difficult to maintain positive mentoring relationships that would lead to effective preparation for the post-coursework process including comprehensive examinations, dissertation proposal planning, and dissertation writing. A mismatch of our interests and those of our advisors was challenging. Although Carol was fortunate to have an advisor who was open and encouraging despite a very different research background, this is often not the case for advanced-career learners. We also often felt we were forced to rely on a cohort of fellow doctoral students to secure the information we needed and find enthusiastic support.

Although there were barriers, we have contributed to the field of adult education through conference presentations, journal publications, collaborative research across different universities, online instruction, and bringing our new knowledge to our current jobs in higher education. Advanced-career learners can add value to doctoral programs if they receive the support they need to be successful. Advanced career learners who serve as role models in regards to motivation, academic habits, and excitement about learning enhance collaboration with younger students and contribute to the field of adult education both while doctoral students and upon graduation.

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