

Through the PRiSM: A Decision Model for Adult Enrollment in Higher Education

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Abstract

This study examines the decision-making process adults may use to enroll in higher education. This project uses studies published in the adult enrollment literature. Four themes and a proposed model emerged: pathway to a better life; reflective learner; synchronizing learning, earning, and living; and match with an academic life. The PRiSM model integrates the themes and illustrates the multifaceted decision-making process.

Introduction

Why adults voluntarily choose to engage in programs of study has been a feature of the adult education landscape for more than 50 years. Since adult learners account for almost half of higher education enrollments in the United States, the factors related to enrollment assume more importance as institutions of higher learning adapt to a changing body of learners. The increasing number of adult learners is changing the nature of higher education in terms of program delivery, the services needed to recruit and retain adult learners, and the meaning of learning in the lives of adults. In the next decade, adult learners may exceed the number of new traditional-age entrants into higher education (Kim, Collins, Williamson, & Chapman, 2004). A better understanding of the decision-making process used by adult learners to enroll in a program of higher education may assist higher education institutions in creating an environment for adults to enter and complete their goals.

This project examined the literature on adult decision-making related to returning to higher education. Our analysis of themes from the literature suggests a new model of the factors involved in the process. For the purpose of this inquiry, adult learners are defined as persons 25 years of age or older who delay enrolling in college after graduating from high school or who stop-out, meaning they “begin their education, leave, and then resume their education, often several times” (Spanard, 1990, p. 312).

Method and Procedures

Two research questions were posed to the literature collected: What are the factors that describe the decision-making process to enroll in higher education for adult learners who delayed or stopped-out of college? How might the factors be combined to develop a model that illustrates the decision-making process?

Three general databases representing the educational and social science literature were searched: Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC), Academic Search

Premier, and Social Sciences Citation Index. Descriptors used were *adult learning*, *higher education*, *retention*, *teaching adults*, *graduate education*, *participation*, and *reentry*. Those terms were combined as in *adult learning* and *higher education*, *adult learning* and *retention*, *higher education* and *retention*. Themes were identified following procedures for analysis and code development (Boyatzis, 1998).

The PRiSM Decision Model for Adult Enrollment

The decision to enroll is a complex process that is made over a period of time (Cross, 1981; Hensley & Kinser, 2001; Micari, 2004). Adults may cycle in and out of various academic programs before finding a program that is suited to their abilities and needs. The major findings from the literature are described in the PRiSM Decision Model for Adult Enrollment, which encompasses the **P**athway to a better life; the **R**eflective learner; **S**ynchronizing learning, earning, and living; and the **M**atch with an academic life.

Theme One: The Pathway to a Better Life

The pathway to a better life describes a factor that recognizes that adults evaluate the extent to which their economic and intellectual circumstances may improve as a result of enrolling in higher education. Occupational advancement through the skills higher education might offer provides an opportunity to become more secure in an insecure marketplace. (Kim et al., 2004; Kasworm, 2003a; McGivney, 2004). Kember et al. (2001), investigating the reasons adults return to higher education on a part-time basis, found that coping with technological changes, especially among professionals, was a prime factor in the decision to enroll.

Economic considerations may be interpreted differently based on gender. Working-class males may evaluate the opportunity costs of attending higher education; i.e., the benefits of a future job, against the certainty of present employment; while females may evaluate the decision based on becoming economically self-sufficient by entering the labor force or by improving present occupational status. A decision point for females, especially those who have experienced a life transition, is the need to become economically independent (Mohny & Anderson, 1988).

A second consideration influencing adults to enroll in education is the intellectual challenge of mastering a body of knowledge. Adult learners enter or return to higher education to pursue knowledge as a personal growth opportunity (Kasworm, 2003a), to improve one's sense of self-esteem in the academic arena (Micari, 2004), to reconnect with intellectual pursuits that may have been neglected during other life stages (Bird & Morgan, 2003), or to deepen the understanding of a subject matter (McGivney, 2004).

This pathway is constantly monitored and evaluated in terms of the benefits likely to be achieved relative to the costs of changes in an adult's social, family, psychological, and economic situation associated with enrollment in higher education.

Theme Two: The Reflective Learner

The reflective learner describes a factor that acknowledges the influence of previous academic experience and an assessment of academic readiness on an adult's decision to enroll in higher education. Kemp (2002) proposes that the decision to enroll may be related to the belief in the competence and confidence that one can master the academic challenges and put forth the effort necessary to complete a program of study. The decision to enroll may be related to the degree that adult learners have examined their attitudes toward higher education, reflected on previous academic experiences, and have developed learning-oriented personalities (Bird & Morgan 2003; Cross, 1981; Micari, 2004; Ponton, Derrick, & Carr, 2005).

Adults may consider the identity changes that might take place as a result of new knowledge and new situations and need to determine whether they are ready for new identities. If they move too far away from comfortable identities, they may not enroll. Gallacher, Crossan, Field, and Merrill (2002) suggest that identity changes as transitions are taking place during the decision-making process.

Hensley and Kinser (2001) suggest that adult learners might cycle in and out of higher education settings while each time revisiting and assessing their academic strengths, self-image, and the extent to which they are moving along their pathway to a better life. This cycle is viewed as practice finally leading to the decision to withdraw or to successfully complete.

Theme Three: Synchronizing Learning, Earning, and Living

Synchronizing learning, earning, and living describes a factor that recognizes the life stage and an adult's ability to balance learning, earning, and living when deciding to enroll in higher education. This does not imply that the elements are equally weighted; rather, they are balanced in a way that enables adults to maintain their learning, earning, and living roles.

Adults consider when the time is psychosocially appropriate to enroll in a program of higher education. The timing is related to a change in a life stage or a life transition (Kasworm, 2003a). Adults consider the impact of their enrollment on career, family time, and other social and community obligations. Financial concerns weigh heavily in the equation to enroll in a program of study. Mohny and Anderson (1988) suggest that females enroll in higher education during times of divorce or when there is a strong need to become financially independent. Other transitions might include the need to develop an identity other than that of mother or spouse.

While intending to enroll, adults consider time available for completing other competing tasks. Thus the future rewards of engaging in study may be moderated by the immediate needs at hand (Lore & Tait, 2004). Disruption to family routines and established roles and identities can act as a barrier to enrollment (Parnham, 2001; Skilton-Sylvester, 2002; Stalker, 2001). Concerns for family can also facilitate the decision to enroll. Enrolling in higher education can serve as the completion of a promise to family

members to obtain a degree or to model for one's children the importance of education (Hensley & Kinser, 2001).

Theme Four: Match with an Academic Life

Match with an academic life describes a factor that acknowledges the importance of institutional support and program flexibility in an adult's decision to enroll in higher education. The decision to enroll in a program of study includes an assessment by the adult of the degree to which an institution not only provides the needed course of study but may also be considered "adult friendly," the degree to which an institution is ready and able to provide academic and social integration within the rhythms of an academic life (Polson, 2003).

Adults are concerned about the following in making the decision to return to a degree program: (a) the degree to which the instructional environment accommodates a working and earning lifestyle; (b) ease in registering for courses and accessibility of offerings, bookstore hours, and other administrative concerns (Hadfield, 2003); bonding with other adult students (Kasworm, 2003b); (c) the extent to which the program structure will lead to success (Kasworm, 2003a); and (d) the extent to which the program encourages completions yet allows the adult to pursue matters important to the learner intellectually and vocationally (Bird & Morgan, 2003).

Implications for Practice

Deciding to enroll in higher education is a complex decision-making process occurring over a period of time. The recent literature indicates that making the decision to enroll is not a linear process but rather a multifaceted process with simultaneous decision points. Nor is it a matter of making only a yes or no decision regarding enrollment based on a strong orientation to learning. The decision to enroll is a cognitive, emotional, and relational decision considered within the web of family, work, social, financial class, gender, institutional support, and program delivery considerations.

While many of the elements in the decision-making process have been mentioned by Cross (1981), the present literature emphasizes the important role of the institution in assisting the learner to make the decision to enroll. Adult students are particularly influenced by the accommodations that the institutional representatives can make with regard to student services. Academic integration becomes a stronger variable than social integration. Thus, higher education institutions may want to consider having a more visible presence in the work and social communities adults occupy. Institutions might also assist the learner to evaluate the opportune time to enroll by helping the learner evaluate and consider present obligations, academic potential, and the benefits that might accrue through participation in higher education.

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