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Narketta N. Myles
The University of Akron, narket1@uakron.edu

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THE FACE OF AN INTERGENERATIONAL COMMUNITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Narketta Myles, The University of Akron

ABSTRACT

With a rapidly growing non-traditional student population in higher education, institutions must begin to reshape much of their framework in how to serve a diverse population of students. With this diversifying of perspective, the older adult student must be given due consideration as an underrepresented student population. As we begin to consider this population of underrepresented students, we must examine the barriers and discrimination that older adults face, and the difficulties colleges encounter attempting to serve this population. Then as administrators, student affairs professionals, and faculty we must support initiatives of inclusion and equity that best serve these students.

INTRODUCTION

According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2005c) by the time we reach to 2030, 20 percent of the U.S. population (over 72 million people) will be aged 65 and older. This means this population aged 65 and over will be doubling in size within the next 25 years. In addition, the life expectancy age has risen to 78 or higher, pushing averages of retirement to age 62, according to the American Council on Education (ACE, 2007). This shift in life expectancy and adult learners was coined by Peter Laslett (1989) is frequently referred to as the "third age", in an attempt to reshape ideals of adult ageing, (Findsen, 2005). In most higher education literature, the older adult is categorically students that fall in between the age range of approximately perspective ages of 50 to 80 years old. These changes in demographics have drastically affected the face of higher education students. More frequently older adults are seeking opportunities to continue learning in a formal setting like college. Many of these older adults are seeking higher education for the purposes of transitioning into a new field, seeking professional advancement, socialization or simply pursuing a life-long dream (Lamb & Brady, 2005). According to a new U.S. Census Bureau report, commissioned by the National Institute on Aging (NIA), by 2030, it anticipated that more than one-fourth of the older population to have an undergraduate degree. According to this same U.S. Census Bureau (2005c) report this new aging group will also be a more diverse population; consisting of an estimated 72 percent non-Hispanic White, 11 percent Hispanic, and 10 percent Black and 5 percent Asian Americans.

BARRIERS TO COLLEGE FOR THE OLDER

Once deciding to venture into college there are many barriers that deter older adults from participating in higher education. Potential barriers for older adults are a low level of prior education, awareness of opportunity and the intimidation of new technologies (ACE, 2007). Older adult learners that may not have completed high school may lack the necessary tools to meet standardized testing needs of higher education, or may be completely unaware to the admissions process overall, and uncertain of where to begin; especially students of ethnic or racial minority groups or a lower socio-economic status. They may also be unfamiliar to the many older adult learner programs and initiatives within their community, which is especially a contributing factor to older adults that live in typically rural areas (ACE, 2007). Financial difficulties may be a determining factor for many older adults as well, due to fixed incomes or retirement. Some adults have also reported a significant intimidation of computer technology, in which these individuals would find much difficulty navigating the online process for college admissions and financial aid.

AGEISM

Once conquering the barriers mentioned above, older adult learners that successfully enroll in college may not necessarily feel as welcomed as the traditional student and feel most often out of place. If entering college within the fall semester, older adults may find many of the student affairs events and activities geared towards the more traditional student age (e.g. music played at festivities, activities offered, extracurricular activities representation, etc.). Many older adults also experience ageist attitudes in their classes when more traditional students exhibit an unwillingness to select them for group assignments; or when forced to work with them, present attitudes of not wanting to help the older adult understand information that may otherwise be common knowledge to the younger students.

SERVING THE OLDER ADULT ON CAMPUS

In a Cruce and Hillman (2012) study, this new population entering college campuses was referred to as the "Tsunami of Silver"; due to the predicted influx of older adults expected to be enrolling into colleges and universities, which is a result of the incoming retiring baby boomer generation. The authors credited the 2005 National Household Education Survey reporting about this "emerging student market" into higher education (p. 593). For this reason and the fact that the national student enrollment rates are in a general decline; higher education should be preparing to develop recruitment, student programming, and outreach services in anticipation of this new college student population. The lack of preparation for this potential student may be due to the void in empirical data and qualitative research on this particular demographic in higher education, (Findsen, 2005; ACE, 2007; Schaefer, 2010; and Cruce & Hillman, 2012). According to a Lakin et al. (2008) survey of U.S. higher education institutions and the American Council on Education, more than 40 percent of institutions responding to this national survey reported that they did not

identify older adult students for purposes of outreach, programs and services, or financial aid due to the low number of participants typically (Lakin, 2009). Some states that currently offer tuition waivers at public colleges include Alaska, Arkansas, Connecticut, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Kentucky, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, New Hampshire, New Jersey, North Carolina, Ohio, Rhode Island, South Dakota, Texas, Vermont, Virginia and Washington DC at various community and four-year colleges.

There are also special programs that offer volunteers 55 and older an opportunity to receive education vouchers of up to $1,000 after completing 350 hours of volunteer service, through the Silver Service Scholarship Grant under the Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act. These volunteer grant vouchers are unique in that volunteer may use them for their own education, transferred to a child, foster child, or grandchild (Finaid.org, 2016).

Older adult comments related to the college experience at Portland Community College demonstrated some of the specific support service areas in need of a better older adult focus or sensitivity: "Support services don't seem to be suited to older students." "I feel that advisors treat us older people like we should know what we are doing and shouldn't be asking questions." "Some teachers give the impression that they would rather not have an older student in their class", (ACE, 2007, p. 19). It is evident that there a needed reshaping of perspectives in the faculty, student affairs, advising, and support services when it related to provisions for this demographic of students. Although there have been some supports implemented to assist older adult students in enrolling in college such as adult learner grants, financial aid support programs, and institutes for life-long learning; the majority of resources are community based. Higher education has just recently began to initiate more than 50 plus programs in recent years, but the financial aid support and support services on college campuses are still minimal when compared to other underrepresented populations. Many of the colleges and universities only offer audit-course options or minimal credit for course options. Several colleges and universities have begun to link learning centers and courses to retirement communities, while some have even begun to develop "adult communities". These adult communities may either be college branded adult communities located off campus or even learning communities housed on campus (University Business Magazine, 2008).

CONCLUSION

Many colleges and universities are motivated to promote initiatives of inclusion and equity to better diversify their campuses; and it is equally important to consider the older adult learner as well in these efforts. In Findsen's (2007) review of two international case studies of older adults in higher education (one theoretical and one empirical) he found that institutions that practice real inclusion and strategic planning to engage this population have a better chance of achieving retention and success outcomes for these students (p. 23). The older adult learners often brings with them a wealth of working and life experiences, professional and social connections, civic and service experience, a well-developed work ethic, and variety in student perspective into the

classroom. University Business Magazine (2008) refers to this as "the most educated generation" in U.S. history. Faculty and advisors must capitalize on the older adults' preexisting knowledge, skills sets, and motivation to assist younger generations to bridge the gap between the traditional students and third age students, while simultaneously building upon their multicultural competencies to better educate and serve this demographic of students. As suggested by Erick Erickson's (1986) stage of adult development Generativity, which is the concern for the next generation, going beyond love for one's own children or grandchildren (Yi-Yin, 2011, p. 764-765). This population's professional connections may also be an advantage to other students when seeking variety in coop and internship experiences. Campus career centers must become innovative in utilizing and fostering these relationships campus wide as well.

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