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Unemployed	59,567	55.2	15,749
Not Employed or Seeking Work	27,495	60.2	8,116

Counseling and Postsecondary Education Transitions

This article examines the role counseling plays in adult learner transitions from adult education programs to postsecondary education. In recent years, there has been a growth in the research on adult learner transitions to postsecondary education. In this brief, the research findings and recommendations are shared on the role of counselors in successfully transitioning adult learners to postsecondary education and ensuring they are successful in meeting their educational goals of entering postsecondary education.

Background

Nationally, the need to develop the workforce to meet the demands of current and future occupations has grown. As the education and skills required by employers have increased, adult learners must be prepared to obtain meaningful employment that will pay livable wages while building and strengthening the economy. The President's Council of Economic Advisers report on the "Jobs of Tomorrow" (2009) states that "occupations requiring higher educational attainment are projected to grow much faster than those with lower education requirements, with the fastest growth among occupations that require an associate's degree or a postsecondary vocational award." According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2011), two thirds of the 30 fastest growing occupations will require some type of formal postsecondary education. When looking at the top 10 fastest growing jobs of the future, 80 percent require postsecondary education, resulting in fewer job options available for adults who have only a high school diploma.

Transitioning adult learners is key to keeping the commitment of adult basic education programs to the adult learners who have identified their long-term educational goal as entering postsecondary education. Zafft et al. (2006) report, "While adults with GEDs or other nontraditional diplomas stand to benefit from postsecondary education, very few actually go on and those that do are rarely successful." If adult basic education programs are able to successfully transition adult learners into postsecondary education, they will help guarantee that adult learners are ready for future workforce demands.

Defining Adult Learners

For the purposes of this article, adult learners and nontraditional learners will be treated as the same. Hensley and Klinser (2001, 88-100) define adult learners as a student who has experienced one of the following: being a parent, working, attending college part-time, being a high school drop-out, or delaying college enrollment for at least one year. Tobbell and O'Donnell (2007, 312-328) define adult learners as college students 25 years and older. According to Choy (2002), a nontraditional student is one who has any of the following characteristics:

- Delays enrollment (does not enter postsecondary education in the same calendar year that he or she finished high school)
- Attends part time for at least part of the academic year
- Works full time (35 hours or more per week) while enrolled
- Is a single parent (either not married, or married but separated and has dependents)
- Does not have a high school diploma (completed high school with a GED or other high school completion certificate or did not finish high school)

By all definitions adult learners are an increasing educational demographic in higher education (Tobbell and O'Donnell 2007, 312-328). Because adult learners face many barriers that traditional students do not, they are in need of more counseling, support, and tracking across adult and postsecondary education (Bedolla 2010, 9-26).

Postsecondary Transition Models

Postsecondary education refers to course work offered at an institution of higher learning, such as two-year and four-year colleges, that earns credit toward a degree and to course work offered at a vocational training institution that earns credit toward a professional certificate. The body of research on postsecondary transitions has grown in the last decade (Bedolla 2010; Jenkins, Zeidenberg, & Kienzl 2009; Reder 2007; Valentine et al. 2009; Alamprese 2004, 26-29; Zafft, Kallenbach, & Spohn 2006). Zafft et al. (2006) looked at basic skills program models to transition adults to college. This study categorized the ideas that emerged from the New England Literacy Resource Center (NELRC) ABE-to-College Transition Project into five models: ESL, GED-Plus, Career Pathways, College Preparatory, and Advising.

The Advising model seeks to raise students' awareness of postsecondary education options and admissions processes through dissemination of information, individual advising, and variations in the intensity of services provided. It is also the model that most closely supports the role of counselors in adult education.

In a study examining the transitions to postsecondary education, Bedolla (2010, 9-26) suggested that it was not academic preparation that determined successful transitions to postsecondary, but rather socioeconomic disadvantages, first generation college status, and other nonacademic risk factors that negatively affected persistence. There was a common finding that successful transitioning has less to do with academic preparation and more to do with external risk factors. As with all transition models shared, Bedolla concluded that "adult learners face many challenges that traditional students do not, leading to a need for more counseling." Adult education programs wishing to help their students successfully transition to postsecondary education must provide learners with support services and guidance in meeting their educational goals.

Role of Counselors in Adult Education

The transformation of basic skills programs to include transition services for adults is an emerging area of concern for the field of adult education. Significant gaps exist in the literature when addressing the role of counselors in adult learner transitions to postsecondary, as most literature focuses on the role of the counselor in transitioning high school seniors to postsecondary or the role of the postsecondary counselor in ensuring adult learner success and retention.

Hewett (2010) suggests that the college transition counselor is responsible for intake and assessment, relationship building with other community resources, relationship building with postsecondary institutions, assistance with next steps (e.g., filling out FAFSA, registering for classes, scholarships), organizing workshops for college success, attendance monitoring, follow-up with absent students, helping with overcoming barriers and records maintenance, follow-up with students who have or have not enrolled in postsecondary education, offering career and educational planning, and recruiting graduates as mentors, tutors, or guest speakers. Alamprese (2004, 26-29) suggests that the role of counselors is to offer learners individualized assistance in understanding the requirements for postsecondary participation, determine whether their life's activities make it feasible, provide encouragement, and identify areas in which learners need to strengthen their skills in order to qualify for admission to college.

Findings and Recommendations

Counselors have many roles to play in transitioning adult learners to postsecondary education. To effectively perform these roles counselors must recognize that adult education is not a final step in the learning ladder for adults. Addressing the unique issues of adult learners in their pursuit to transition to postsecondary education requires purposeful, consistent, and student-centered counseling support services. Recommendations for the role of counselors in transitioning adult learners to postsecondary education include the following:

- **Counseling services must be flexible and convenient** (Kling, Gary, & Dodd 2004, 18-23). Unlike traditional students, adult learners often have family demands and work responsibilities (Hansen 1999). These demands can be overwhelming and distressing for adult learners. Counseling interventions that were effective took these factors into account by providing flexible systematic support (Kling et al. 2004). Counselors should schedule meetings, workshops, and groups in the afternoons, early evenings, or weekends. These times are typically convenient for adult learners' schedules, and services must be accessible when students need them. Counselors must be willing to serve learners in perhaps unconventional ways, even customizing their educational program of study to meet their unique educational goals. They also must reconsider traditional practices in order to accommodate the learners' needs.
- **Counselors should draw on the many strengths and coping skills that adult learners already possess.** Counselors must be mindful that college is but one priority in the lives of adult learners; the focus of service should be on enabling students to be successful in all life arenas (Leonard 2002, 60-73). Alamprese identified a typology of adult transition programs that included three models for basic skills transitions to postsecondary education: awareness and orientation, counseling and referral activities, and the comprehensive program (Alamprese 2004, 26-29). Counseling and referral focuses on more individualized support that includes helping students assess their strengths and weaknesses in relationship to the demands of college and identifying college resources that can help them address their weaknesses. Counselors must allow learners to play a role in improving or developing counseling services, include them in the planning, and give them meaningful ways to share their ideas.
- **Counselors need access to, and must provide, the information and resources needed by adult learners.** Dean and Ericksen (1984, 1-24) establish a clear need for counseling services and share ways that academic counselors can help adult students in transition. The needs of adults in this study include having access to information on jobs, career counseling, information on educational programs, and job skills training. Counselors need to be able to facilitate access to learning resources, provide information about learning resources, offer counseling and referral services, and provide access to resources at the institution and in the community, such as financial aid, child care, tutoring, and emotional and motivational support.
- **Use a case management model.** This model allows individual adult learner needs to be met by counselors. It requires students to meet one on one with counselors at regular intervals. Counselors should be able to help adult learners cope with emotional, physical, intellectual, cultural, vocational, relational, and other transitions (Haggan 2000, 427-442). In *How to Build Bridge Programs that Fit into a Career Pathway*, Estrada creates a step-by-step guide that identifies eight elements to building a successful pre-college bridge program

(Estrada 2010) based on a case study of the Carreras en Salud program in Chicago. One of the steps is providing academic and non-academic support services. Estrada points out that for adult learners to be prepared to compete with traditional students they need case management and support services that assist with personal, family, and work problems (2010). The counselor should determine the adult's life and career development stages to help them in designing an appropriate, personalized counseling program (Dean and Ericksen 1984, 1-24). Information and workshops on stress management should be incorporated into the services offered. Counselors must follow students until they have completed their developmental coursework. There must be an extended period of required contact time for the counselor to follow the student.

- **Focus on removing barriers.** According to Dean and Ericksen, counselor roles include keeping students motivated and being a source of support and guidance (1984, 1-26). In many situations, adult students must cope with problems created by a system designed for traditional students. Counseling for adults should focus on removing these barriers. In a study by Zafft et al., counselors are seen to have a critical role since adult learners will face challenges beyond academic preparation. It is the counselors at the adult education level that are in an ideal position to prepare adult learners for the challenges they may face when transitioning to college (Zafft et al. 2006). Nonacademic factors can result in high attrition rates from education programs because students are trying to juggle work, school, and family (Mathews-Aydinli 2006).
- **Prepare students to compete successfully with more traditional students.** This might include requiring students to attend mentoring and tutoring sessions. Alamprese (2004, 26-29) suggests that counseling services supplement academic instruction with activities designed to help adults function successfully in college; these can include college orientation courses, and workshops on study skills and time and stress management.

These recommendations are for implementation at the program level and can be put into practice immediately. The implications that follow, however, go beyond the program level and require ongoing reflection and policy evaluation to implement.

Implications

Jobs in the future will disproportionately employ workers with education and training beyond the high school level. Postsecondary education can provide the skills needed for these jobs. The implications that evolve from the literature highlight several ideas to consider when seeking to successfully transition adult learners to postsecondary education.

- **Institutionalize the existing transition services provided by counseling staff.** Transition services exist in varying degrees across adult education programs. Some programs have

significant services in place and some have none. The services highlighted above are offered both formally and informally by programs. In some cases counselors are full-time staff members, and in some programs there are no designated staff members for these support services. If transition efforts are to expand and increase, counseling services should be institutionalized across programs to consistently provide the services adult learners need. This may include not only establishing new services, but new staff positions as well.

- **Develop links between adult basic education programs and postsecondary education institutions.** Part of the challenges facing counselors who are seeking to transition adult learners to postsecondary education is that establishing relationships at the postsecondary level may be difficult and time consuming, requiring ongoing follow-up on the part of the counselor. Adult learners would be better served if the connections between adult basic education programs and postsecondary education institutions were formalized, and a system to facilitate the connections was established at the local and state levels.

Conclusion

Bedolla (2010, 9-26) suggests that adult learners' retention and class performance can easily be affected by the students' lives outside the classroom. Adult schools that provide students with the support and information needed about career opportunities and the college transfer process tend to be most effective, as are those which offer counseling to address the personal problems that arise in students' lives. The research reviewed in this article has focused on addressing the role of counselors in transitioning adult learners to postsecondary education at the adult education level. While counseling is not the only element to support successful transitions for adult learners to postsecondary education, it is a significant element. Counselors in adult education play a critical role in the successful transition of adult learners to postsecondary education and should be viewed as an integral component in adult education programs seeking to support the educational goals of their students.

"In today's economy, postsecondary credentials are the difference between family self-sufficiency and not being able to make ends meet" (Liebowitz and Combes, 2004). Adult learners that successfully transition to postsecondary education and complete their education are positioned to make significant economic gains, possibly going from unemployment or low-wage jobs to jobs with sustainable salaries and benefits. If the goal of adult basic education programs is to prepare low-income, low-skilled adult learners for the jobs of the future then we must focus on successfully transitioning them to postsecondary education. Successful transitions ultimately lead to a stronger workforce and a stronger economy. Given the many barriers that adult learners face while pursuing their education, counseling can play a strong role in supporting them in meeting their goals. Adult learner counseling services help students feel more connected to the program, better understand the supports and barriers to their learning, and build confidence in pursuing their life goals, making transitioning to postsecondary education a viable and realistic next step.

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