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Planning Developmental Interventions for Adult Students

This article proposes a framework for planning developmental interventions for adult students.

INTRODUCTION

For the past fifty years, our profession has held the point of view that student development should be the focus of our interventions. In the wake of the Student Personnel Point of View (American Council on Education, 1937), academic literature has emphasized a developmental perspective that deals primarily with traditional-age college students and their developmental concerns. increasingly, however, student affairs professionals have come to realize that the student body on our college campuses is changing. Baby boomers and older adults are filling the spaces left vacant by a diminishing traditional-age student population.

Developmentally, traditional and nontraditional students have one thing in common. They are both groups of people at a transition point in their lives. Traditional-age college students experience the transition from adolescence to adulthood, separation-individuation from family, and identity development, while the adult learner may be on the other end of the separation-individuation process, in midlife transition, or coping with a marital separation or divorce. In fact, many adult students report that a transition in their lives is the major trigger for their return to formal learning (Aslanian & Brickell, 1980).

While the developmental tasks of traditional-age college students and adult learners may differ, the transition process may hold similarities. Quite often, however, our student affairs interventions have been targeted for the specific developmental tasks of the traditional student. This article suggests that student affairs professionals need to give greater consideration to the developmental needs of adult learners. In particular, it proposes a framework for planning developmental interventions for them. Section one provides a brief outline of the

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developmental tasks and an overview of the transitional processes of adulthood; section two compares developmental versus mental health models of intervention; and section three delineates functional roles of student affairs staff in meeting the developmental needs of adult students.

TASKS AND TRANSITIONS IN ADULTHOOD

Adulthood is characterized by a number of developmental tasks and transitions. These tasks have been outlined by many theorists, including Danish (1981), Erikson (1978), Levinson (1978), and Neugarten (1968). Okun (1984) has summarized the tasks to include:

- (a) the ability to be a self-differentiated individual with a meaning and purpose in life;
- (b) the ability to maintain intimate relationships and to care for oneself and others;
- (c) the ability to take responsibility for one's choices and their consequences, to renounce unattainable choices, and to recognize that some variables influencing choices are out of one's control;
- (d) the ability to deal with the disappointments and frustrations of adult life; and
- (e) the ability to balance, continuously, individual, work, and family roles (p. 8)

In addition to the developmental tasks faced by adults, it is important to examine the transition process they experience. Transitions in adulthood provide opportunities for growth or deterioration (Danish, 1981; Schlossberg, 1981). They can also be times of stress (Pearlin, 1980), crisis (Sheehy, 1976), or excitement (Danish, 1981). A transition can be viewed as a period of moving from one state of certainty to another, with an interval of uncertainty and change in between (Sherman, 1987).

According to Schlossberg (1981), a transition is said to occur if an event or nonevent results in a change in one's assumptions about oneself and the world and thus requires a corresponding change in one's behavior and relationships. Clearly, adaptation can be a great challenge for adult learners who seek our services.

Before introducing the concept of intervention in adult transitions, however, some views of how adults adapt to change without professional interventions are needed. Behaviorally, adults respond to change in very diverse ways. Some, for example, see transitions as events to be resisted at all costs (Hopson, 1981). Knox (1977) proposes that there are at least six ways in which adults adapt to significant change events: frantic activity, action, educative activity, seeking assistance, contemplation, and withdrawal.

Change also has an emotional impact on adults. Feelings of loss and ambivalence are associated with all changes in life (Manis, 1974). Ambiguity may play a role in making the experience of transition difficult. Ambiguous situations and events for which there is no preparation and which have conflicting or unclear expectations can become crises (Albrecht & Gift, 1975).

Similarly, an individual's ability to adapt to a transition depends on his or her balance of assets and liabilities in the area of coping resources (Schlossberg, 1984). Support is seen as one of these critical assets in the transition process. A number of studies suggest that the impact of critical life events may be altered by the quality of the support system available to an individual (Danish, Smyer, &

Nowak, 1980). Returning adult students report that support is important to their learning experience (Huston-Hoburg & Strange, 1986) and that it helps to combat depression when they are faced with negative life events as they reenter college (Roehl & Okun, 1984).

RATIONALE AND GOALS FOR DEVELOPMENTAL INTERVENTIONS

Intervention, at the very least then, can be viewed as a potential support for the transitional adult and as an opportunity to minimize ambiguity by providing learning experiences that foster the adult's awareness of what might be expected before, during, and after the transitional event. It may further serve as a resource in dealing with developmental tasks of adulthood by expanding one's awareness of oneself-one's values, dreams, and choices. Depending on how one views transition and the adaptation process, it may also provide the opportunity for learning coping skills to deal with transitional stress, or it may give an adult the chance to make anticipatory preparation for a transition so that stress may be reduced.

Danish, Smyer, & Nowak (1980) make a fine distinction between *enhancement* and *prevention* approaches to intervening in adult development, a distinction useful in establishing goals for transition intervention. They refer to the enhancement approach as being the developmental viewpoint and the prevention approach as stemming from the mental health model.

For the developmentalist, the emphasis is on growth. Interventions occurring before the life event are considered life enhancing, while those occurring during the event are supportive. Once the event has happened, interventions are considered of a counseling nature. For example, midlife planning programs are intended to enhance an expected life event; midlife transition support groups are used as a person changes career paths; and counseling might occur for those having difficulty adjusting to the transition.

In the mental health model, however, the emphasis is on coping with the stress of the event and *adapting* to it (Brammer & Abrego, 1981; Hansen, 1981; Peartin, 1980). An individual's coping behavior is evaluated on a continuum of mental health to mental illness. In this model, one attempts to prevent or remediate distress associated with change.

The enhancement approach is one from which the majority of adult students could potentially benefit, especially in relation to somewhat predictable life events. It is also consistent with the student development foundation of the student affairs profession.

The developmental model appears particularly useful in establishing goals for intervention in predictable life events and transitions, especially at midlife. It does, however, downplay the stress associated with the transition, whether predictable or not. Brammer and Abrego (1981), on the other hand, emphasize the stress associated with transition and the skills one needs in order to cope with it. They suggest that in the process of coping with life-threatening change, a person can learn how to manage future transitions. In addition, the change sets in motion a renewal process characterized by new life goals and directions.

As service providers committed to the growth and development of all students, student affairs professionals have the opportunity to establish goals for their interventions with adult students that might include: (a) enhancing the growth of adult learners by providing services before transitional events occur, (b) providing support and reducing stress during a transitional event, and (c) providing

counseling services to adult students who have already undergone a transitional event (see Table I below).

Table I
Developmental Interventions for Adult Students

Purpose	Timing	Goals
Enhancement	interventions used before the life event occurs.	Self-exploration and awareness Education Skills training Career and life planning Preparation for academic life Understanding of adult transitions
Support	Interventions used during the course of the life event.	Group support for specific developmental tasks Development of a personal support network Mentoring and role modeling Advocacy Linking
Counseling	Interventions used after the life event has occurred.	Remediation Reduction of stress Assessment and action planning individual counseling Peer counseling Group counseling Referral

Note. Adapted from Danish, Smyer, and Nowak (1980).

PLANNING DEVELOPMENTAL SERVICES FOR ADULT STUDENTS

In order for the goals of developmental interventions to be achieved, student affairs professionals need to create new methods of service delivery appropriate for adult students. Eight functional roles can be important in meeting these goals (see Table 2 opposite).

The first *area-specialized* services-encompasses all existing student affairs offices and departments. Developmental intervention goals can be met by providing staff with information about adult development, by rethinking essential services in light of the information on adulthood, and by adapting existing services to better conform to the needs of adult students. Research has shown the importance of rapport-building in facilitating behavioral change (Waterhouse & Strupp, 1984). If an individual does not "feel understood," program participation, adherence, and satisfaction all decline. Empathetic listening, enlisting the adult learner as collaborator, and ensuring that program staff are well-versed in the typical issues, concerns, and fears of adult learners in transition, are three

Table 2
Functional Roles of Student Affairs in Providing Services for Adult Students

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|--|---|
| <p>1. Specialized Services</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adaptations for adult needs • Staff awareness of adult development | <p>2. Education</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide information about adult development, transitions, the college experience • Life skills training |
| <p>3. Advocacy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Speak on behalf of adults on campus - Develop task force | <p>4. Clearinghouse</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Link students to campus services - Prepare a resource file |
| <p>5. Referral</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Link adult students to community agencies - Direct students to other educational institutions and resources | <p>6. Program Planning</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Plan workshops, speakers, activities appropriate for adults - Develop support groups |
| <p>7. Networking and Mentoring</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Assess and develop student support system - Serve as role models | <p>8. Counseling</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Provide individual, group, and peer counseling support specifically for adults. - Use outreach mechanisms. |

important methods of building rapport with this population. Examples of change that might result from this collaboration include offering career services during times more appropriate for adults or planning special workshops on midlife career change.

A second functional area is that of *educating* adult students about the transition process, about adult development and learning, and about the college experience. Ideally, this can be accomplished through a credit course, not unlike the *University 101* course offered to entering freshmen on some campuses.

Being an *advocate* for adult students on the college campus is a third functional role for student affairs professionals. Services on most campuses are clearly designed to accommodate the tasks and transitions of traditional students. 'In speaking out on behalf of adult learners, professionals can often break through the red tape they encounter. The adequacy of child care services, facility operating hours, commuter parking, academic advisement, and registration procedures are more easily challenged by many workers within the system than by a few students who view themselves as outside the system. A task force and advocacy team can be created with representatives from student affairs, continuing education, academic affairs, and the adult student population.

A fourth functional role in service delivery is to serve as a *clearinghouse* for needed services, linking adult students to the appropriate office or agency that

can best meet their needs. Linkages with offices that deal with nontraditional students, such as continuing education, graduate departments, and women's studies programs should be firmly established. Women's centers should be strengthened in recognition of the large percentage of female adult students. Closely aligned to this functional area is a fifth, that of *referral* when existing services do not meet the developmental needs of a student. Community agencies, for example, frequently offer support groups for widows and widowers, the newly divorced, and recovering alcoholics. Small campuses with limited services should strengthen their referral sources.

In some cases, additional *program planning* can be arranged to meet the needs of adult students on college campuses. This sixth functional area includes the planning of such activities as support groups, workshops, speakers, brown bag lunches, and family activities that assist adults with specific transitions and developmental tasks such as reentry into the job market after a number of years at home. McCoy (1977) has developed an expansive list of programs that can be offered during specific life phases. They include dual career workshops, multiple role workshops, midlife career change programs, and retirement seminars, to name four. These programs are most appropriate for providing support when a life event is occurring.

Networking and mentoring, on the other hand, empower students with the skills needed to face any transition. In this seventh functional role, students can be aided in analyzing their existing support networks, meeting new people in their professional fields, finding resources, and learning skills necessary for creating their own personal and professional support networks. The student affairs professional has the opportunity to serve as a mentor or role model in this area.

A final functional role for service delivery is that of *counseling*. Adult counseling services, peer counseling programs, and outreach are essential to the success of service delivery to adults in this area. In the developmental intervention model, these services would be most appropriate after the transitional event has occurred and when an individual is having difficulty adapting to the transition.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

This article presents a framework for planning developmental interventions for adult students. A review of the tasks and transition processes of adulthood has underscored the need to target interventions for this rapidly growing student population. Similarly, a comparison of developmental and mental health models has suggested the value of a developmental framework in planning our interventions and services. Finally, eight functional roles for student affairs staff working with adult learners have been outlined.

It is clear from this model that student affairs can play a major role in the provision of services for adult students. Since student affairs is the one campus division that cuts across all existing services, it has the power and the obligation to play such a primary role.

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