ARTICLES

Catherine Greene 2 The Returning Adult and Student Personnel
Margie Mathison 7 The commuter Student in the private Urban college
Paul Zielke 13 Towards a Coherent Theory of Student Personnel

OTHER FEATURES

19 M.S. Candidates --- College Student Personnel --- 1975
24 Mid-Year Placement
25 Changes of Alumni
25 Convention Notes
25 About the Authors
25 Contributions

The Journal of the Indiana University Student Personnel Association is published by the Indiana University Student Personnel Association, the Department of Residence Life, and the Department of College Student Personnel Administration.

Editor: Ann Deborah Alter
Committee Members: Fawn Lehninger
For this issue: Karen Farmer
Advisors: Dr. Elizabeth A. Greenleaf, Chairman, Department of College Student Personnel Administration
Dr. David A. DeCoster, Assistant Dean of Students and Director of Residence Life

THE RETURNING ADULT AND STUDENT PERSONNEL
Catherine Greene

It is a well-known and long-accepted fact that the cornerstone upon which the higher education system in this country has been built is that of traditional American universities are they are because of their past. In part, this is due to the very nature of the educational process — the idea of building a knowledge base from what has already been learned or discovered. Today, however, it must be reasonably obvious to those acquainted with the realm of higher education that such reliance on tradition will no longer be adequate in terms of planning for what is to come: the code word for future trends in this area must be change.

On university campuses today, there is a change occurring which is both fundamental to the very nature of the institution and far-reaching in terms of its implications for student personnel planning. It seems evident that colleges and universities are losing what has been thought of as their "natural" clientele in ever-increasing numbers: enrollments everywhere are down and all indications are that they will continue to drop. What is not as obvious is that the students who are enrolling are of a new type as well. At the present time, over 55 per cent of the undergraduate student population is outside of the traditional eighteen to twenty-one-year-old, full-time, four-year college career students. (Boyer, 1974, p. 7) Who is making up this new student body of non-traditional students? A good deal of it is made up of students who are enrolled on a part-time basis only; another share is made up of students who are taking time off between semesters to work or travel; and another portion, one that will be the main emphasis of this paper, is made up of mature adults (the 35 and over group) who have decided, for one reason or another, to continue their post-secondary education after an extended period of time.

One of the causative forces behind this trend is that a good percentage of the adult population is taking another look at where theyfit into the scheme of things in society as a whole. In his article, “Breaking up the Youth Chute,” Ernest Boyer refers to life in our society as being sliced up for us like so many pieces of salami, with the biggest “chunk” being doled out in the form of full-time work activities. (1974, p. 5) As this model seems no longer satisfactory to suit the needs of American adults, one of the most preferred alternatives to it is being an indicated desire to continue or complete their post-secondary education. One study done by the Commission on Non-Traditional Study concludes that “75 per cent of the adults sampled are ‘would be learners,’ or individuals who would like to study during the coming year.” (Jacobs, 1973, p. 7) In addition, there are substantial numbers of adults who are choosing to realize their preference: according to statistics released at the end of last year by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, over 800,000 adults over the age of 35 were enrolled in college. (Young, 1973, p. 6)

For those adults who have chosen to continue their education, there has been an inevitable confrontation with a unique set of problems and circumstances that arise in part from their personal situation and in part from the very
structure of the system of higher education in this country. The prospect of returning to school after an extended period of time poses a number of potential personal crises that must be overcome or dealt with at some level if the individual is to gain the utmost benefit of the educational process. One of the most crucial of these is evident from the very time the decision is made to return to school until the individuals resume their previous or improved position in society: the threat of an impending loss of status, both economic and psychological, that will inevitably accompany a return to student life. The primary loss is that of income which results if the "new" student has been contributing substantially to the family bank account in the past. In addition, there are, beyond the immediate need for these tangible trappings of prosperity, the status symbols, which often take on the greatest perceived value for the middle-class American. Loss of them can be devastating. (Glass and Harraberger, 1979, p. 246) Both of these factors can place considerable stress on the student in terms of the homelife situation and in terms of academic achievement.

On a broader level, the adult student may encounter difficulty in coping with what is perceived to be a loss of status in the eyes of the rest of society. Part of this difficulty may stem from the traditional view in our culture that "work, the badge of adulthood, tends to be regarded as the only fully legitimate activity of maturity." (Thompson, 1976, p. 12) The adult student must cope with the realization that the norms of the society place the activity of being a full-time learner distinctly below that of being a full-time producer. This may have severe personal repercussions for the individual: the middle-aged adult returning to school from a productive work situation may experience a feeling of being worthless in the eyes of society. (Glass and Harraberger, 1979, p. 246)

Obviously, the solution to problems on this level will depend for the most part on the situation, the student, the circumstances, and the ability of those in the entire family to cope with such external pressures. However, the student personnel administrator can play a key role, from the university’s standpoint, of providing student services, in aiding the student and their families to adjust to their new and unique position. Those on the counseling end of student personnel, for instance, might do well to begin developing programs such as adult self-worth groups, where students (and their families if possible) would engage in consciousness-raising exercises aimed at helping them decide where they want to fit into this changing society, what sort of an impact they would like to make on that society, and what type of skills they need to develop in order to make such an impact. This sort of thing would go beyond providing a mere empathy group to the point of supplying some concrete techniques for the individual to deal with problems. Another student service which can do a great deal to help overcome the strains this type of situation places on a student is the Financial Office. Priorities need to be reassigned to include the adult student: merely removing the restrictions on part-time student applicants would do a lot in this respect of alleviating the financial burden.

A second major problem that the mature adult student is likely to encounter when returning to college after an extended period of time is to be inherent in the system as it exists at the present, is the realization that the institutional atmosphere is almost entirely youth oriented. The college that the student has previously attended, a certain college which he has attended since his own early group now offers a culture which is highly youth oriented. Initially at least, he finds himself physically, socially, and psychologically out of place. (Glass and Harraberger, 1974, p. 212) This can have very serious implications for the individual on all levels of the learning experience: including everything from how hard one studies for a test, what sort of activities one feels comfortable participating in, to one’s perception of performance in terms of academic achievement. (Glass and Harraberger, 1974, p. 212) The institutional structure itself poses a problem for the adult student in this regard, as the college places a heavy emphasis on those "above" - those September to June academic calendars, and the classic American approach to the student-teacher relationship, is difficult for the adult student to become a part of the mainstream of campus life.

One final aspect of this problem is that an adult student who may wish to regain a portion of previously lost status may find it exceedingly difficult to do so in such a youth oriented atmosphere. This relates particularly to those students who are attempting to regain their status in terms of participation and involvement in campus activities. As Glass and Harraberger state in their article:

The problem for our middle-aged full-time student arises when he tries to rebuild his status to fit with his changed life pattern. The student community is youth oriented, with leaders emerging through kinds of social relationships which he feels he does not have access. The larger community within which the institution resides often has a town-gown kind of orientation and looks upon the individual lacking the necessary knowledge, commitment and sensitivity to provide effective leadership. (1974, p. 212)

One possible solution to this which could be implemented right now on college campuses is to have a volunteer service organization set up to provide students with practical work experience relating to their field of study and to adapt these programs especially for the adult student. This would require a specific emphasis on utilizing their past experiences and on keeping them in touch with that "real world" they left behind to become a student. In addition, it would serve a variety of needs for the mature student: first, it would provide a means of becoming involved on the college campus without invading the "territory" of the younger student; second, it would allow the student to overcome the feeling that any previous experience is for naught when it comes to being a student; third, it permits the student to see the relevancy of academic endeavors while still in school; and finally, it would help to re-establish personal feelings of self-worth and achievement that might have been sacrificed along with the job to return to school. This is only one example of how a program can be implemented to meet the needs of students; further development of such ideas is limited only by the imagination and interest of those involved in student personnel work.
There is another aspect of this dilemma that must be confronted by the student personnel worker on behalf of the adult student. Along with the resistance which may be encountered from the entrenched fringe in the case of attempts by the adult student to participate in or make use of the various student services, goes a good deal of stigma in the student's own mind about seeking them out. After all, by the time people reach the age of 35, they should be well equipped to handle their own problems, so why would they need to go to the counseling center? Or anyone who has been managing a household for 15 years ought to be able to read a college catalog, so why would any academic advising be needed? (Besides, anyone who goes to all the trouble to come back to school when they don't have to, why are they paying tuition?) Even if people have been involved in the labor scene as long, as many of these adult students have, they should have a good idea of what the job market is demanding so why try to adapt the placement services to meet their needs?

Unfortunately, many adults are not only treading waters that are just as uncertain, if not as uncertain, as any younger student, but the special problems discussed above may mean that adults need the available student services even more critically than a young student. And it will be the responsibility of those working in the area of student personnel to adapt their services and initiate new ones to meet the special needs of the mature student. There have been some preliminary steps taken on a few campuses in the form of services student councils and discussion-sensitivity groups aimed at dealing with the added pressures facing married students but even these are mainly geared towards the under 30 set. Student personnel workers must go beyond these types of things to provide programs, activities, and avenues for involvement specifically for students approaching middle-age.

There is one segment of this newly emerging student population that merits special consideration in the discussion of current student personnel services and that is the mature woman student. Over 35, bored, and wondering what to do with the remaining 30 or so years of her life. One of the most common alternatives for these women has been the return to school. As they return to school, they are confronted many times with problems which tend to magnify the scope of the identity crisis well known among women of this age.

In her article, "The Needs of Women Returning to School," Judith Bernen Brandenburg does an outstanding job of outlining the issues involved in dealing with mature woman students and of pointing out areas of development for student personnel programs. Along with the identity problem, the woman student is faced with the additional complication of having to compete in an aggressive situation after years of living in a dependency situation. "The student must be able to read critically, analyze information, attack questions, and assert her own ideas. Problems of dependency and lack of confidence may underlie the entire educational process." (1974, p. 11) The other major personal conflict which usually arises for women returning to school is the natural resistance on the part of her family and friends to the fact that the woman is working. One is led to believe that it is both threatening and disruptive to the normal family routine. Consequently, the woman may have to cope with substantial feelings of guilt over the appropriateness of her decision.

These kinds of concerns must be taken into account by every kind of service the college and university is offering that student. Specific areas that must begin altering their presentation of services immediately, according to Brandenburg, relate to admissions and orientation procedures, academic advising and study skills development, personal and vocational counseling, and placement practices. (1974, p. 13) In addition, the issues of financial aid and child care services are of particular importance both to the woman student and the student personnel administrator who is dealing with the situation. The main problem in the area of financial aid is that students who are attending school part-time, as are most adult women, are ineligible for the majority of the aid programs. Brandenburg notes that it is the responsibility of the student personnel worker to seek out and establish new aid programs which would allow for the special situation of these students. Likewise, in the area of child-care services, she feels it is up to the university, especially those in student services to take the lead in setting up such centers on a shared work basis. (1974, p. 15-17)

In reality, this just barely scratches the surface of the complications and adjustments that will be facing the institutions of higher education in the years to come as the student-body, the primary recipient of the university's functions, gradually alters in composition, becoming ever more diversified and yet ever more in need of the special services which these schools have offered through personnel workers in the past. While it is inevitable that the difficulties in assessing and meeting these needs will increase as the student clientele shifts more and more to a non-traditional status, the challenges for personnel administrators must be met with integrity and imagination if the quality of the educational process is to be maintained or developed to its highest potential.

REFERENCES


