THE ADULT PART-TIME LEARNER IN COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES: A Clientele Analysis

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Using the 1975 National Center for Educational Statistics/Bureau of Census "Participation in Adult Education" survey data, this paper presents an analysis of part-time students at colleges and universities—who participates and who persists. Separate analyses of public two-year colleges and noncredit activities are also presented. The analysis is followed with a discussion of the implications. A general conclusion is that adult education at colleges and universities may rest on a precariously narrow base.

Key works: adult education; continuing education; part-time college students

Examining data on part-time students at colleges and universities, one can sketch the most typical consumer and her courses. She (a large proportion of part-time students are female) is between the ages of 25 and 34, married, without children, and working full time. Moreover, she is most likely to have a college education and a family income of between $15,000 and $20,000. Perhaps most interesting, she is very likely to be a teacher. About 23 percent of all part-time students are employed in the education sector. In contrast, only 8 percent are employed in the health-care industry, 7 percent in public administration, and 6 percent in the finance and insurance industry. The typical student is motivated primarily by concerns related to employment and is neither greatly satisfied nor dissatisfied with the instruction. For all the lip service paid to the need for special programs for returning adults, the bulk of the part-time offerings appear to be rather conventional college fare. About two-thirds of all activities are taken for credit, and

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almost 90 percent are taught in the classroom by traditional lecture/discussion methods. Classes typically meet for three hours per week for about sixteen weeks.

The foregoing statistical profile is based on special analyses of the 1975 Participation in Adult Education Survey. The profile suggests some intriguing elements in the pattern of sociodemographic variables that describes the adult participant in American higher education. Among other things, it suggests that a disproportionate number of adult students come from advantaged backgrounds in terms of the standard measures of socioeconomic status. It suggests, too, that higher education for adults in the aggregate has changed little over the years despite the advent of external degrees and other nontraditional options for earning college credit. However, although these generalizations may be true for the total population of adult students in colleges and universities, they obscure some fundamental differences in the sociodemographic characteristics of adult students in different sectors of the higher education enterprise. Moreover, simple descriptive statistics tell us little about the relative importance of such variables as age, sex, income and educational attainment in accounting for participation and persistence among adult part-time students. Accordingly, the purpose of the present study was to examine the relative impact of key sociodemographic variables on adult part-time participation in higher education generally and to compare and contrast participation patterns for four-year colleges and universities with those of public two-year colleges, and participation in non-credit learning activities with participation in credit courses. A secondary purpose was to undertake a similar set of analyses with persistence as the dependent variable.

BACKGROUND

A great deal of attention has been devoted to the study of participation in adult education generally (Carp, Peterson, and Roelfs, 1974; Froomkin and Wolfson, 1977; and Johnstone and Rivera, 1965). Very little attention, however, has centered on part-time adult participation in colleges and universities, and most of the work that has been done has been carried out at the institutional or regional level (Medsker, et al., 1975; Ross, Brown and Hassel, 1972). Whereas these analyses are useful to specific institutions and areas, they are of limited use to policy makers, researchers, and administrators generally. Yet the most dramatic increase in the enrollment of adults has been at colleges and universities (Anderson, 1977). One reason, of course, is that until recently, colleges had depended almost entirely on enrollment in full-time students aged 18 to 22 years old. The percentage of this age group en-

rolling in higher education has recently begun to decline. Add to this the fact that the actual number of 18-to-22-years-olds will fall rather precipitously, by demographic standards, in the coming decade, and it is clear that colleges and universities will become considerably more reliant on part-time adult students (Spence, 1977). Thus, it is important that policy makers and administrators at institutions of higher education have a clear understanding of who the part-time college attenders are, why they attend, and why they drop out.

METHODOLOGY

Data Base

The National Center for Education Statistics, in cooperation with the Bureau of Census, conducts a trienniel survey of participation in adult and continuing education. The purpose is to "provide insights about people and activities in the rapidly changing area of adult education" (National Center for Educational Statistics, 1976, p. 1). Comprehensive employment and demographic data are collected for each individual in the survey, and additional detailed information about the educational activities is collected from participants in adult education.

The most recent available data were collected in May 1975. In that survey, almost 90,000 individuals were canvassed. After excluding full-time students, 79,631 individuals remained. Of these 9,173 were participants in some form of adult education. And of that group, 3,102 participated in activities sponsored by two-year and four-year colleges and universities.

Definitions

Since this study is based on a secondary analysis of data collected by the Census Bureau for the National Center for Education Statistics, the following definitions are closely related to the questions and measures employed in the NCES study. The Census Bureau/NCES definitions are satisfactory for the purposes of this study and conform for the most part to definitions commonly accepted by researchers and practitioners in the field of adult education:

1. *Adult.* An adult is any person 17 years of age or over.
2. *Participant.* A participant is any adult not enrolled full time in a high school or college, and not institutionalized, who took part in some form of organized adult education offered by universities or 2-year or 4-year colleges, including but not limited to classes, workshops, and private instruction.
3. *Higher Adult Education.* Higher adult education refers to any organized

educational activity offered by universities or 2-year or 4-year colleges, which is engaged in by any person 17 years of age or older who is not a full-time student.

4. *Nonparticipant.* A nonparticipant is any adult not enrolled full time in a high school or college, and not institutionalized, who did not take part in the form of organized adult education described in definition 2.
5. *Persistor.* Any participant who responded, "Yes" to the question: "Did you complete this course?" Other response options were "No, still taking this course" and "No, dropped the course."
6. *Dropout.* Any participant who responded, "No, dropped the course," when asked about completion.
7. *Satisfaction.* Satisfaction refers to a participant's subjective judgment concerning the helpfulness of the course or activity in meeting his or her objectives for participating. Satisfaction was measured on a five point scale in which the anchors were "Much more helpful than expected" and "Much less helpful than expected."

Analyses

Separate analyses were undertaken for participation and persistence. The data were analyzed by crosstabulation and multiple linear regression. In addition, the results were compared with similar analyses on adult education participation generally.[1] The variables used in the analysis are described in Table 1.

The dependent variable for the participation analysis was dichotomous—participation in college-sponsored adult education/

TABLE 1. Variables Used in General Analyses

Variable	Description/ Question	Operational Definition
Participation	Participation in adult or continuing education	0 = no 1 = yes
Persistence	"Did you complete this course?	0 = completed 1 = dropped
Age	Age of individual.	
Race	Race of individual.	0 = non-black 1 = black
Sex	Sex of individual.	0 = male 1 = female
Education	Highest grade attended.	
Income	Family income.	Estimated from 14 income groups used in the survey.

TABLE 1 ***(Continued)***

Variable	Description/ Question	Operational Definition
Occupational status	In a high status white collar occupation, i.e. (1) professional, technical, or kindred worker, or (2) manager or administrator.	0 = no 1 = yes
Human services employment	Employed in the human services sector, i.e., health, education, religion, or welfare.	0 = no 1 = yes
Full-time employment	Working full time.	0 = no 1 = yes
West	Living in Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Hawaii, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, Utah, or Washington.	0 = no 1 = yes
Suburb	Living in a Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area, but outside the "central city."	0 = no 1 = yes
Veterans benefits	Eligible for veteran's benefits, i.e., Vietnam era veteran.	0 = no 1 = yes
Job motivation*	Taking the activity for specific job-related reasons.	0 = no 1 = yes
Course length*	Number of weeks the activity is scheduled.	
Lecture*	The only method of instructional delivery is classroom lectures and discussions.	0 = no 1 = yes
Occupational course*	The activity is described as "Technical, vocational, managerial, or professional," or for diploma/degree credit.	0 = no 1 = yes
Satisfaction*	"Which one of the following statements best describes how helpful this course or activity was in meeting your objective?"	1 = Much less helpful than expected 2 = Somewhat less helpful . . . 3 = As helpful . . 4 = Somewhat more helpful . . . 5 = Much more helpful . . .

Original data source: National Center for Education Statistics. Survey of Adult Education, 1975.
*Used only in the persistence analysis.

participation in some other form of adult education. Thus, the regression was the equivalent of a two-group discriminant analysis and may be considered in that way. Eleven independent variables were introduced into stagewise, ordinary, least-squares linear regression. The model developed for the analysis was the same as the model employed in an earlier study of general participation in adult education (Anderson and Darkenwald, forthcoming). The model assumes a dominant causal effect, although it is recognized that interaction effects are likely. Age, sex, and race were entered in the first stage because they must be seen as logically prior to any attempt to infer causal sequence in regard to the determinants of participation. Number of years of schooling was entered into the equation in the second stage. It was assumed that in a causal sequence, educational attainment or schooling logically follows immutable personal characteristics and precedes status and situational variables such as occupation, income, and place of residence. The remaining six variables were entered together in the third and final stage, as any assumptions about their causal order in relation to participation would have been, at best, highly speculative. It was, however, assumed that income, occupational status, type of employment, place of residence, and eligibility for veterans benefits would be unlikely to affect the amount of formal schooling or personal characteristics; instead, the likely direction of causal effects is assumed to be the opposite. In this kind of regression analysis, multicollinearity can be a major problem when the independent variables are highly intercorrelated. In the present analysis, however, multicollinearity did not appear to be a problem since the highest zero-order correlation among the independent variables was only 0.41.

The analysis of persistence was based on a similar model. In this analysis, however, an additional stage was added. Age, race and sex were entered first. Education was entered second. Eight situational variables were entered in the third stage. In the final stage, seven program characteristic variables were entered. The dependent variable for persistence was whether the individual completed the course or dropped the course. If the individual was still taking the course, he was not included in this analysis.

The same variables, with minor variations, were used in the separate analyses of public two-year college and noncredit participation and persistence.

FINDINGS

The findings are organized as follows. The analysis of participation is presented in the first section. The second section summarizes the find-

ings on persistence. Within each section, the results for all adult education in general are contrasted with the findings for part-time participation at colleges and universities. Following these two sections, the results for public two-year colleges and noncredit activities are discussed.

When interpreting the results emphasis is placed on the standardized regression coefficients or beta weights. Using standardized coefficients with unit variance facilitates the discussion of the relative effects of the variables. In multiple regression each independent variable in the equation is controlled on the independent variables which precede and follow it. The resulting beta weights provide a measure of the net or independent effect of each variable. Table 2 provides a summary of all statistically significant beta weights. Cross-tabular data are also used to highlight or elaborate the key findings.

PARTICIPATION

Summarizing the results of participation in adult education as a whole, it is clear that education and age are the most significant factors. Education has a positive effect ($\beta = .13$) and age a negative one ($\beta = -.11$). High occupational status ($\beta = .08$) and employment in the human services sector ($\beta = .08$) are also significant positive factors in participation. Similarly, access—as measured by living in the Western states ($\beta = .06$)[2]—and financial assistance—as measured by eligibility for veteran's benefits ($\beta = .06$)—have positive direct effects. Being female ($\beta = .03$), high income ($\beta = .02$), suburban residence ($\beta = .02$), and full-time employment ($\beta = .01$) have positive, but negligible effects. Black racial status has a slight negative effect ($\beta = -.02$). It is important to note that the individual's education, age, and type of employment are far more influential characteristics than income or race in determining participation in adult education.

The data used for this research are more recent and/or more comprehensive than those used in earlier studies. The results, however, are consistent with the previous research (Carp, Peterson, and Roelfs, 1974; Froomkin and Wolfson, 1977; Johnstone and Rivera, 1965). The conclusions of this general analysis are, perforce, influenced by the factors which affect adult attendance at colleges and universities. By statistically analyzing the differences between participants at colleges and participants in other forms of adult education, it is possible to provide some conclusions about the reach and scope of part-time collegiate education. (See Table 2). This regression accounts for 9 percent of the variance and is significant well beyond the .01 level. Education, not surprisingly, is the most significant discriminating variable ($\beta = .20$).

TABLE 2. Beta-Weights of All Significant Variables in the Analyses

	Participation				Persistence			
	General	College	Public 2-yr.	Non-credit	General	College	Public 2-yr.	Non-credit
Equation data								
N	9713/ 74385	3102/ 9713	1366/ 3102	1515/ 3080	6346/ 6892	2328/ 2542	903/ 1039	1186/ 1233
Adjusted R_2	10%	9%	25%	8%	7%	7%	7%	3%
F Statistic	783	77	90	21	33	13	6	4
Level of significance	.01	.01	.01	.01	.01	.01	.01	.01
Age	−.11*	−.10*	—	.16*	.10*	.10*	.13*	.06
Race	.02*	—	—	−.04	−.05*	—	—	—
Sex	.03*	.04*	—	−.04	—	.05	.08	—
Education	.13*	.20*	−.33*	−.11*	.10*	.16*	.16*	.07
Income	.02*	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Occupational status	.08*	—	−.13*	—	—	—	—	—
Human services employment	.08*	.10*	−.06*	—	—	—	—	—
Full-time employment	.01	.04*	—	−.07*	.06*	.08*	—	.07
West	.06*	.08*	.17*	—	−.03*	−.05*	−.10*	—
Suburb	.02*	—	—	−.04	—	—	—	—
Veterans benefits	.06*	.03	—	−.10*	—	—	—	—
Job motivation	VARIABLES NOT ENTERED				.08*	.09*	.10*	—
Course length	----------				−.12*	−.07*	−.07	—
Lecture	----------				—	—	—	—
Occupational course	----------				—	—	—	—
Satisfaction	----------				.12*	.11*	.14*	.10*
Two-year	----------			.12*	----------			

*Significant at the .01 level. All other listed beta weights are significant at the .05 level.

Over 40 percent of all participants in college-sponsored adult education already hold a college degree. Participants in other forms of adult education are likely to hold only a high school diploma. In addition, the part-time college student is younger ($\beta = -.10$) and more likely to be employed in the human services sector ($\beta = .10$) than the noncollege participant. These last two facts reflect two important aspects of adult education at colleges and universities. A fairly substantial portion (9%) are essentially college-age students (24 years of age or younger) pursu-

ing their degree on a part-time basis. Another large segment consists of teachers and other educators upgrading their credentials—and, generally, their salaries as well—by pursuing graduate courses and degrees in the evening. More than 23 percent of all part-time students at colleges and universities are employed in the education sector. At four-year colleges, the figure jumps to 35 percent. Living in the western states, where access to adult education is generally greater, is another positive factor for part-time college attendance (β = .08). Finally, being female (β = .04), being employed full time (β = .04), and receiving veterans' benefits (β = .03) are more characteristic of college participants.

The primary client of American colleges and universities has been, and still is, the full-time 18-to-22-year-old. That age cohort is shrinking. Moreover, as the economic value of a college degree has diminished, the rate of attendance of 18-to-22-year-olds has declined (Freeman, 1976). Colleges and universities have responded by declaring a new era of lifelong learning. The consumptive value of a college degree is presumed to be an important factor for adults, but claims about the scope of lifelong learning must be tempered by these data. The typical adult student at colleges and universities is well educated—he/she has a college degree. These "adult" students are relatively young—over 60 percent were under 35 years of age. They are seeking degrees—often advanced degrees—and other employment-related benefits; only 16 percent saw no degree-credit or employment value in their educational pursuits. And education, more than any other industry, is the source of these students. Almost 80 percent claim to be taking the course for a professional certification degree or for general employment value,

Persistence

The persistence model explains 7 percent of the variance (See Table 1). In most respects, it is similar to the model for adult education in general (See Table 2). There is one intriguing variation. In the general model, blacks are less likely to persist (β = −.05). This does not seem to be true if they are enrolled in a college program. A possible explanation for this is that the noncollege programs in which blacks and other minorities are typically enrolled (job training, adult basic education) are targeted at individuals who have a history of educational failure. Hence, the rate of completion of minorities in these noncollege programs is predictably low. Other significant demographic characteristics are age and sex. Older individuals (β = .10) and women (β = .05) are more likely to complete courses. The most important demographic characteristic is education (β = .16). It accounts for half of the

explained variance and has half again as much explanatory power as it does in the general model. Two situational factors are important: full-time employment (β = .08) and access as measured by living in the western states (β = −.05). The latter variable suggests that easy access decreases the likelihood of persistence. This is consistent with previous research on traditional-age college dropouts (Berls, 1969). Pursuit of part-time education for employment reasons is also positively related to completion (β = .09). Examining program variables, the one significant variable is course length (β = −.07). Colleges, according to this evidence, can increase persistence by shortening course length. In addition, the quality of the course, as measured by expressed satisfaction, is a relatively important factor (β = .11). This is less surprising than the fact that the variable explains only 1 percent of the variance.

Public Two-Year Colleges

The regression model for distinguishing public two-year from other college participants explains 25 percent of the variance. Practically all of this can be attributed to one variable, education (β = −.33). It accounts for 19 percent of the variance. Only a third of all part-time students at two-year colleges have completed two years of college education. In contrast, almost two-thirds of all part-time students at four-year colleges have completed four years of college education. Clearly, part-time education at four-year institutions is heavily weighted toward graduate education. Moreover, the community colleges reach further down the educational ladder than the four-year institutions. Almost 7 percent of their part-time students have not completed high school. Virtually none at four-year colleges lack a high school diploma. High occupational status is also negatively related to participation at community colleges (β = −.13), additional evidence of their more egalitarian nature. Employment in the human services sector is negatively related to participation at public community colleges. Location in the western states, with their vast network of community colleges significantly increases the likelihood of participation at those institutions (β = .17).

The explanatory factors of persistence change very little for public two-year colleges. The beta weight of satisfaction rises modestly (β = .14), and it explains a larger proportion of variance (2% vs. 1%). This may reflect the lesser importance of the credential. If the credential is less important, the course content must be more satisfying. Further evidence of the consumptive emphasis at two-year colleges is the fact that 23 percent of these students proclaim the absence of employment or credit reasons. At other colleges this percentage is only 9 percent.

Concomitantly, full-time employment is not a significant explanatory factor for persistence at two-year colleges.

Noncredit Participation

Slightly over half of all participants engaged in nondegree-credit activities. The analysis suggests that participants in these courses differ considerably from those pursuing degrees. They are older ($\beta = .16$). They are slightly less likely to be black ($\beta = -.04$) or female ($\beta = -.04$). Although only significant at the .05 level, the propensity of blacks and women to pursue degrees is noteworthy. It may well reflect a stronger occupational commitment and the desire for the appropriate entry-level professional credentials. Education is negatively related to noncredit activities ($\beta = -.11$). Full-time employment is also negatively associated with the pursuit of noncredit courses ($\beta = -.07$). This presumably reflects the lower employment value of these activities—that is, they do not lead to a credential. Individuals eligible for veterans benefits are less likely to participate in noncredit activities ($\beta = -.10$), an obvious result of the payment policies of the Veterans Administration. Moreover, noncredit participants are somewhat more likely to pursue their education at community colleges ($\beta = .12$). This probably reflects the convenience, cost, and program variety of these institutions. The inclusion of the two-year variable eliminates the explanatory power of the variable west. The regression accounts for 8 percent of the variance.

Determination of the persistors is more problematic for the diverse clientele in noncredit courses. It is interesting that course length has no perceptible influence. Expressed satisfaction with the course is most important ($\beta = .10$), and the only variable significant at the .01 level.

CONCLUSIONS

Adults who participate in part-time educational activities offered at colleges and universities are in many ways similar to adults who pursue education sponsored by high schools, community organizations, employers. Indeed, most of the adjectives for the general adult-education participant need only be underscored when describing adult participants at colleges and universities and other adult education agencies. Adult students at institutions of higher education are better educated, younger, more likely to be employed, and more likely to be pursuing education for job-related reasons. The concentration of the younger adults in adult education in general, and in courses offered at colleges and universities in particular, is a cause for concern. School

districts across the nation are already feeling the effects of a declining birthrate. To the extent that adult education is highly dependent upon the participation of young adults, enrollments are likely to decline as the smaller youth cohort reaches adulthood. O'Keefe (1976) has projected this problem for adult education generally. College and universities, with 60 percent of their "adult" students below the age of 35, are particularly vulnerable. Another concern is the dependence of college-level adult education on part-time students with veterns' benefits. Almost half of all males now enrolled in college programs are eligible for veterans' benefits. As this program is phased out, there is likely to be a significant decline in attendance by individuals in this category. This projection, of course, assumes that a general entitlement program will not replace veterans' educational benefits—probably a reasonable assumption at this time. Perhaps the most ominous implications for the near future relate to the number of adult participants who are employed by the schools and colleges. A full 23 percent of all part-time students at colleges and universities are employed in the education sector. At four-year colleges it is 35 percent. Considering that only 5 percent of the entire adult population is so employed, part-time college programs are disproportionately dependent on these students. Colleges and universities are acknowledged to be on the precipice of a period of contraction. Moreover, there are many women with full educational credentials ready to reenter the job market after a period of childrearing. Thus, the educational sector as a pillar for adult and continuing education at colleges and universities seems to be a particularly insecure one, which is likely to bear considerably less weight in the future.

Not all of the implications of the analysis are discouraging. College-level adult education draws heavily those individuals with more previous education. As the educational level of the population rises, there will be a broader base of support for college-sponsored part-time programs—perhaps at the expense of the programs offered by competing institutions.

One source of adult education participants that does not seem to have been sufficiently tapped is the education of older adults. Only 6 percent of all participants at colleges and universities are 55 years of age or older. When they do participate, these individuals evidence greater satisfaction and higher levels of persistence. Presumably, they have more interest in the consumptive value of education than its investment value. Thus far, however, institutions of higher education have typically been content with educational formats geared toward the current degree-seeking students. Administrators of continuing education programs will have to rethink the nature and delivery of their services if they intend to reach these older adults.

Public two-year colleges, according to these data, are reaching a consistently more diverse clientele than the four-year institutions. Their part-time students come from a far wider variety of educational and employment backgrounds. Those who pursue noncredit activities are also more likely to do so at two-year colleges. In sum, these two-year institutions seem to be fulfilling their missions, at least in a relative sense, to serve as centers of community education.

It has been pointed out that continuing education at four-year colleges and universities rests on a precariously narrow base. It would be regrettable if the erosion of the base precipitated destructive competition among two-year colleges, four-year institutions, and other agencies offering adult education. Unfortunately there is already some slight evidence that the competition has begun (Lindsey, 1978). Anderson (1977), considering this possibility, has argued for increased communication and coordination among institutional providers of adult education. In the absence of vigorous efforts in this direction, disruptive competition for the adult student market will in all likelihood accelerate sharply within the next five years.

FOOTNOTES

[1]The wider analysis is reported in a monograph by Anderson and Darkenwald (forthcoming).

[2]West coast states, particularly California with its 104 community colleges, provide greater access to adult education opportunities than most other states. Thus, we consider the variable "West" a proxy for greater access to educational opportunities.

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