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Developing an Online Orientation Program for Adult Learners at Grand Valley State University

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Developing an Online Orientation Program for
Adult Learners at Grand Valley State University

By
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Justin Thomas Sims

Abstract

Adult learners are continuing to dominate enrollment trends in higher education due to added accessibility in attending college as well as the growing needs and demands from society. The transition to college for adult learners can be filled with unique circumstances as many adults have to balance not only their academic responsibilities, but other personal and professional commitments. As a result, universities need to address the adult learner student population and identify resources and opportunities for adult learners to engage with faculty and staff while getting acclimated to the campus environment. This project aims at creating an online orientation program for adult learners at Grand Valley State University (GVSU) that address the specific needs and concerns adult learners may face when enrolling in higher education. The overall intent of the program is to offer flexibility to adult learners to complete the program at a pace and platform that is best suited for them, while also allowing adult learners an opportunity to gather information on specific resources and opportunities available to them for best success in higher education.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Problem Statement

Higher education has continued to evolve in providing access to numerous communities and individuals in today's society. The ability for universities to offer a number of course offerings in a flexible and user-friendly platform has allowed students to enroll in higher education at a rapid pace. While universities main population are often traditional- aged students, students aged between 18- 24 (Rabourn, Brckalorenz, & Shoup, 2018), a rise has been seen in the number of adult learners enrolling in higher education. Adult learners face a unique set of challenges and circumstances that can result in their focus or ability to commit to higher education to diminish as they progress in their academic career. However, institutions within higher education have repeatedly ignored the needs and wants of the adult learner population when it comes to program design, campus acclimation, and experiential learning (Ross- Gordon, 2011).

There are many factors that can contribute to adult learners having difficulties in transitioning effectively to higher education. One of those factors can be a lack of connectedness to the university early on in their academic career. Many adult learners who drop out of their educational programs often do so early in the first few weeks of the semester as a result of them not being properly orientated to their program and the campus (Kereka, 2005). The overall impact that orientation programs have on all students on campus is a great one that universities should be looking to invest in with appropriate resources and accessibility in order to help students feel comfortable and connected to the campus. Another concern that adult learners may face when enrolling in higher education is their perception of not meeting academic standards at the time of enrollment. Kallison Jr. (2015) outlines that adult learners may face a deficit in reading, writing, mathematics, and technological skills when returning or enrolling in classes. As a result, some

adult learners may experience a lack of confidence in their academic abilities when considering enrolling in higher education (Carp et al., 1974). Finally, adult learners can face psychological barrier when entering higher education, as they feel their experiences or life events can be outdated from the traditional aged student population (Merriam & Bierema, 2013). Adult learners crave the opportunity to share their experiences in appropriate settings but may feel a lack of connectedness or relatability with others who may not have went through similar circumstances (Merriam & Bierema, 2013).

These outlined challenges are a result of student affairs professionals and universities within higher education failing to address these needs and concerns from the adult learner population. Many of the resources and services offered on college campuses are designed with the traditional aged student in mind, which can often ignore adult learner theories and ideas. This ignorance from institutions has resulted in nearly 36 million people in the United States having some type of higher education experience but are not currently enrolled at an institution (Wolf, 2019). This can be attributed to not tailoring resources or experiences directly to adult learners, not properly orientating adult learners about opportunities on campus, or failing to educate faculty and staff on how to identify the needs and wants of adult learners and implementing theories or strategies to support them.

Importance and Rationale of the Project

While all students on a college campus deserve an equal amount of support and resource allocation, adult learners traditionally have different needs and desires in a college environment. For example, many adult learners may be more focused on opportunities for professional development, financial literacy, and strategic partnerships versus a traditional aged student looking for engagement opportunities through residential life or fraternity and sorority life (Stevens, 2014).

Many institutions are guilty of catering to their traditional aged students as they dominate the student population, but institutions should look to implement opportunities for adult learners to become connected to the campus early and often. Student engagement begins from the first point of contact with a student, as the way an institution presents information and offerings to a student can provide opportunities to ensure that the student feels comfortable and apart of the campus. Ensuring that adult learners are given resources and information at the start of their academic career at the institution can help lead to further engagement on campus and an overall retention of that student for semesters to come (Merriam & Bierema, 2013).

If adult learners feel a disconnect from the university and its campus climate, it can lead to a number of discouraging implications for the student. One example of this is an adult learner's overall confidence in choosing to enroll in higher education. Often, adult learners face anxiety about enrolling due to factors such as a previous negative experience in higher education or tensions with other agents they may be involved with in addition to higher education (Busher & James, 2019). This can lead to adult learners holding negative memories from their past and result in a disengagement or lack of confidence in changes in their new academic journey (Busher & James, 2019). Therefore, it is crucial for student affairs professionals and institutions to ensure that adult learners are given the opportunity to take control of their learning environment and introduce them to appropriate resources and support on campus to help the transition back to college be a successful one in the student's eye. Another implication of if adult learners do not get proper engagement on campus can be their lack of identity transformation. People's sense of identity helps them locate themselves in society and define who they are in relation to other people, and the transition into higher education for adult learners can cause the individual to undergo an identity transformation as they accept student as a new identity (Busher & James, 2019). Adult

learners often have multiple identities, whether that be professional, parent, or spouse, and have struggles in adapting a new identity as student (Busher & James, 2019). This can lead to adult learners struggling to overcome their negative views they may have when it comes to being a student and focusing their efforts into growing that student identity. It is important for adult learners to acknowledge their past experiences and other identities when adapting a new student one, as it can draw on reflections and engagement with others who may be going through something similar (Merriam & Bierema, 2013). Busher & James (2019) recognizes that adult learner students will often gravitate towards each other to offer support, encouragement, and camaraderie, which can help adult learners feel more valued and comfortable in engaging with their campus and peers. However, institutions should be looking to provide opportunities for this assimilation process amongst adult learners in an organized and formal setting before the semester begins in order to encourage that support and camaraderie.

One important way to provide that opportunity for adult learners to gather relevant information and begin the acclimation process to the university is through orientation programs. Orientation programs are a common way for universities to not only educate their students about certain policies and information about the university, but also a way for students to develop a sense of comfort and adaptability on campus. Miller (2017) highlights that orientation programs serve as a great resource for adult learners to not only confirm their choice of an institution based on its fit and feel for the student, but also as a great opportunity to engage with students, faculty, and staff on campus and build effective relationships early. Orientation programs are also seen as a way to boost retention of students from semester to semester, as a familiarity and sense of belonging in a student's identity will help a student strive towards academic achievement (Scagnoli, 2001). For adult learners, providing an effective and engaging orientation program from

the start of the students' academic career can offer opportunities to gather relevant information and resources that fit their specific needs and wants as a student population. Adult learners often look to retain information that is more pertinent and direct to their situations, so it is important to adequately adapt your program and its information offerings that will capture the adult learner's attention and focus (Merriam & Bierema, 2013). This orientation program, with a focus on specific adult learner needs and circumstances, can also help ease an adult learner's concerns about enrolling in higher education and provide support from the time of their initial enrollment.

Background of the Project

Enrollment of adult learners in higher education has been a growing area of student population in recent years. This initiative in enrollment can be attributed to President Obama's legislation of the American Graduation Initiative, which was aimed to promise nearly \$2 billion in federal aid to institutions in an effort to produce 5 million additional degrees for adult learners by 2020 (Titus, 2011). This investment by the federal government was aimed as a way to not only get adult learners enrolled in higher education once again, but as a way to grow our economy as a result of an educated society. Institutional planners began to implement strategies and theories to better align with the mindsets and circumstances of adult learners to address the changing political-economic contexts and the emerging labor demands (Titus, 2011). With this change, there was also a commitment to trying to lower tuition prices to make higher education more affordable to adult learners. Turner (2003) found that adult learners use of Pell grants increased during times of decreased opportunities in the labor market, resulting in adult learners putting an investment in their education as an opportunity to better position themselves for a job. Institutions should take note of this development as tuition prices rise, the accessibility for adult learners may decrease, which can lead to a decline in overall enrollment of this student population.

The growing demand for an educated society has resulted in an increase of adult learners seeking out higher education as an avenue to better position themselves in a competitive job market. Carnevale, Smith, and Strohl (2010) state that nearly 63% of jobs in the United States require some type of higher education in order to be qualified for the position. Meanwhile, Brown (2012) outlined that less than half of the United States workforce hold an associate degree or higher, which has created a gap in qualified candidates. As a result, adult learners are turning to higher education as a way to create opportunities to be better positioned to meet the demands of the growing workforce while seeking new ways to diversify themselves as candidates. Student affairs professionals and institutions need to take this data and evaluate the affordability of their programs for the growing demand of the adult learner population and ensure that their programs are designed in ways to help adult learners become educated in their intended fields in order to advance their careers and our overall society.

Recently, Grand Valley State University has introduced programs and financial support for adult learners who are wishing to enroll in the university. GVSU has begun to offer online, accelerated programs that provide the adult learner flexibility to pursue their degree in a fashion that is appropriate to them, while also designing the program with a career- preparation mindset. This is done by offering one rate for tuition of \$500 per credit for both in and out of state students. After the completion of the first course in this accelerated program, the university will reimburse students for the cost of a future course. This is a beneficial option for adult learners in providing clarity of the cost of attending the university and providing access for students all over the country to enroll, thus creating an opportunity to grow enrollment nationwide. The initiative, led by President Philomena V. Mantella, aims to grow the accessibility and enrollment of students by the

year 2025 by offering financial stability for students while offering high- quality programs and experiential learning, which is something that adult learners seek when choosing an institution.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this project is to create an online orientation program for adult learners at Grand Valley State University (GVSU). GVSU is a four- year public university that is located primarily in Allendale, MI. A liberal arts institution, GVSU serves both traditional aged college students as well as adult learners in a variety of degrees and programs at the undergraduate and graduate level. GVSU was selected as the university for this project due to its lack of an exclusive online orientation program specifically for adult learners, but also due to the university's push for more online learning and adult learner enrollment. This project will develop an online orientation program that is specific to the needs of the adult learner population at GVSU but will also serve as a model for other institutions to adapt for their own use.

The project will outline an online orientation program to educate adult learners about the resources and opportunities available to them at GVSU, while also easing concerns of adult learners that can lead to success. The online orientation program will provide engaging modules on a number of different topics for adult learners, including the use of GVSU systems such as Mybanner and Blackboard, as well as resources available to adult learners like tutoring centers, academic advising, financial aid, and mental health services. The modules will also serve as a way for adult learners at GVSU to become familiar with GVSU technology systems to ensure they have an understanding of its basics and functions before the semester begins.

One of the benefits of this orientation program is its exclusivity online. This allows adult learners the flexibility and independence in completing it in a setting that is comfortable to them and at a pace that allows them to fully absorb the information presented. In addition, the online

platform will allow adult learners the ability to access it in multiple fashions to ensure that they can complete the program in whichever platform is comfortable for them. This online orientation program will help adult learners increase their preparedness for higher education and establish a connection with the university and its staff and resources before the semester begins, resulting in a comfortability and relationship with the campus to begin.

Objectives of the Project

This online orientation program is intended to meet the needs for the adult learner population specific to GVSU. It is meant to be able to be adapted and modified by other universities, in relation to their student population or institution type, and be implemented for their adult learners and new student orientations. The objective of this program is to identify and address the needs of adult learners by customizing the orientation program to make it more accessible and engaging for the adult learner student population at GVSU. This customization should be created by staff and faculty at GVSU working collaboratively to identify those needs and concerns of adult learners and be willing to implement relevant information and theories to the program. Upon completion of this program, the adult learner at GVSU should have an increased knowledge of resources available to them on campus, as well as strategies and avenues to be able to effectively engage with the campus population and environment at GVSU.

Definition of Terms

- **Adult Learner:** Students over the age of 24 or over the age of 21 at first entry to college (Rabourn, Brckalorenz, & Shoup, 2018).
- **Traditional - Aged Student:** College students between the ages of 18 and 24 years old (Rabourn, Brckalorenz, & Shoup, 2018).

- **Self- Directed Learning:** Self- Directed Learning can be defined as the notion that the learner takes control of his or her own learning; that is, the learner decides what and how to learn (Merriam & Bierema, 2013, p. 62).

Scope of the Project

The target population for this project will be adult learners at Grand Valley State University. The resources, technology, theories, and objectives will be specific towards adult learners and intended to support their success at GVSU as students. In addition, the primary audience for this project will be administrators and student affairs professionals at GVSU who will be in charge of implementing this online orientation program at the university. The online orientation program will not cover any specific academic information in relation to the individual student, as that will be covered in transfer advising and registration sessions through the specific advising center of the students intended major on campus. This online orientation program will also be focused primarily for students who are enrolled at a four- year institution, like GVSU. However, this program could be adopted and modified for use at other institution types, which will be covered in chapter three.

It is important to note that while completion of this program will be mandatory for adult learner students to complete at GVSU, it does not guarantee success, either academically or personally, as a result of completion. Further, the resources and information presented in the modules of the online orientation program are intended to meet the general population of adult learner needs, but there may be unique circumstances and situations for individuals that may need further attention or response from the university.

The next chapter will cover the relevant literature and theories in relation to adult learners in higher education, including self- directed learning, characteristics of adult learners, online learning for adult learners, and the importance of orientation programs.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Introduction

In an effort to identify and expand on the issues presented in chapter one, it is important to examine the existing and relevant literature on adult learners. This chapter will: (a) present relevant theories among adult learners, with the focus on self- directed learning; (b) review literature on adult learner characteristics and orientation programs; and (c) provide reasoning and conclusions of how this literature will be used in the third chapter.

Theory and Rationale

One of the main theoretical frameworks in relation to adult learners and this project is the concept of Self- Directed Learning (SDL). SDL can be defined as the notion that the learner takes control of his or her own learning; that is, the learner decides what and how to learn (Merriam & Bierema, 2013, p. 62). The key, as identified by Merriam & Bierema, (2013), is that the learner takes responsibility for their learning (p.63). SDL can also be identified as a process that humans go through at various stages when it comes to taking that responsibility of their learning. By investing in SDL through understanding of learning needs, preparation of programs, and engaging learning assessments, SDL can result in the learner feeling the value of the approaches much more, thus making it worth their time to participate in SDL (Merriam & Bierema, 2013, p.66). Knowles (1975) outlines a six-step process, including (1) creating an atmosphere of mutual respect and support; (2) diagnosing learning needs; (3) formulating learning goals; (4) identifying human and material resources for learning; (5) choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies; and (6) evaluating learning outcomes. It is important to note that all learners, including adult learners, can go through these stages at various stages of their learning journey.

When focusing on adult learners, there can be many motivating factors for the responsibility and engagement in SDL. Caffarella (2000) suggests that there are four goals that motivate learners in SDL. The first is the aspiration to gain knowledge and develop skills. The second goal is to become more self- directed in learning, followed by the third goal of inspiring transformational learning (2000). Finally, the last goal of SDL is aspiring the learning to be emancipatory, which is moving beyond the realm of individual learning (Caffarella,2000). These goals can be used by adult learners to help quantify their specific wants and needs while keeping a centralized focus on an overall goal. In addition, another motivating factor of SDL with adult learners is the ability to self- manage and self- monitor one's progress. Self- management situates the learner within their own social context and is the degree to which the learner assumes control of their environment so they can meet their goals (Merriam & Bierema, 2013, p.69). Self- management also involves using learning materials and sustaining communication to build collaborative understanding (Merriam & Bierema, 2013, p.69). Self- monitoring is the learner's ability to gauge their own cognitive and metacognitive processes (Merriam & Bierema, 2013, p.70). By engaging in both self- management and self- monitoring, an adult learner can accurately gauge their own timeline in SDL and can adjust that timeline or acquire resources in order to continue.

Many adult learners learn best when self- directed for a few reasons. One of those reasons includes the nature of adults and their preference in being in charge of their own learning (Knox, 1988). A contributing factor to this preference is that adults often have an immediate need to learn and be able to learn in situations that are most relevant to them. According to Maryville University (2016), there were nearly 700,000 adults enrolled in higher education, with a projection of almost 950,000 by the year 2025, according to the National Center for Educational

Statistics (NCES). Factors leading to adults reenrolling in higher education include an adults need for a career change, financial necessity, increasing competition for jobs, and an ease of access to education (Maryville University, 2016). These factors help demonstrate the need of adults often having to immediately apply their education and SDL to their life circumstances.

While there are positives that come with SDL, there are also some limiting factors and barriers that come with it. For example, some adult learners may desire a certain SDL process but may face barriers to adequately perform their SDL such as personal responsibilities, like raising a family, or a lack of access to resources such as transportation or technology to adequately perform their SDL. In addition, some adults lack the flexibility to adapt to social changes or contextual changes that may affect their instruction or performance (Morris, 2019). Some adult learners may thrive in a setting on self- directed setting, but some may also face issues with motivation to continue without constant feedback or guidance from peer mentors or educators (Morris, 2019). These issues are some of the limiting factors that adult learners may face when introduced to SDL, so it is important to recognize this process to be individualized and constantly evaluated by the learner.

Research and Evaluation

Characteristics of Adult Learners. Adult learners have many characteristics that make them a unique population in higher education due to varying levels of experience and motivational factors. When looking at motivational factors, there are different learning orientation styles that can often resonate with adult learners. One type of learning style is to be goal-oriented, which is when the learning is taking place as a means to attain another goal (Merriam & Bierema, 2013, p.151). This style of goal-oriented learning can be motivated extrinsically, which comes from outside factors (Merriam & Bierema, 2013, p.151). An example of an adult learner looking to

participate in goal-orientated learning is taking part in an educational program in order to obtain a degree or certificate, which can then be used for a promotion in their professional life. Another type of learning style is activity-oriented, which is when learners participate for the opportunity to socialize with other learners and for the sake of the activity (Merriam & Bierema, 2013, p.152). Engagement in activity-oriented learning can stem from an adult learner's desire to be more social with others and for pure enjoyment of the activity (Merriam & Bierema, 2013, p.152). Examples of activity-oriented learning includes joining a book club or participating in a cooking class with others. Finally, the third type of learning style is learning-oriented learners, who are focused on developing new knowledge for the sake of learning (Merriam & Bierema, 2013, p.152). This type of learning style is most likely intrinsic, which comes from self-motivation (Merriam & Bierema, 2013, p.152). A person may engage in a learning-oriented learning style by conducting research on their favorite sports team based on love for the subject. Overall, these differing learning styles are unique to the individual adult learner and can be fluid during their SDL or academic journey.

Another characteristic that dominates adult learners is their amount of time they are able to commit to their academics. Stevens (2014) highlights that adult learners often have to balance not only their academic schedules, but also their work lives, family lives, and any other personal interests they may be pursuing. These conflicting schedules can often lead to issues for adult learners in devoting their time to certain educational activities. However, Stevens (2014) study on adult learner perceptions, attitudes, and preferences in higher education can highlight the opposite. Nearly 88% of the students surveyed felt very comfortable in managing the work-school studying balance, while 84% of the students agreed that they were able to adequately prioritize time for academic achievement (Stevens, 2014). This is important to understand, from an educator's perspective, in working with adult learners that there may be multiple items requiring their energy

and attention. Adult learners find it beneficial when expectations and due dates for assignments are clearly laid out by professors so they can properly prepare and make time for completing it (Stevens, 2014).

Adult learners also have a desire to build relationships with faculty members while enrolled in higher education. Adult learners, specifically those over the age of 35, worry about attending classes with younger age groups due to their perceived differences in life experiences (Kimmel, Gaylor, & Hayes, 2016). Merriam & Bierema (2013) argue that while life experiences can be drawn on in learning situations, it can also stimulate the need for further learning (p.106). This is also important for adult learners as part of acquiring their SDL process. The opportunity to build relationships with faculty members resonates with adult learners because they can view them more as peers who are able to help them achieve their learning intended goals (Kimmel, Gaylor, & Hayes, 2016). Faculty members can play a huge role in facilitating this process for adult learners. Bourke, Vanderveken, Ecker, Bell, & Richie (2020) find that faculty members view relationships with adult learners as a negotiated and mutual learning process, often filled with discussions about the specific adult learners needs. This can be done through ongoing conversations with the adult learner over the course of the semester to ensure that the adult learner is continuing to have access to the faculty member as well as updates on evolving expectations (Bourke et.al, 2020).

When adult learners enroll in higher education, they may be lacking in some certain skills or knowledge academically. This can be attributed to their time off from school or lack of exposure in how to develop these skills in general (Merriam & Bierema, 2013). In Kallison Jr.'s (2015) study on postsecondary transition programs for college readiness, they found that adult learners can face a deficit in reading, writing, mathematics, and technological skills when returning back to higher education. In addition, adult learners also have a difficulty in identifying credible sources

when evaluating research (Rapchak, Lewis, Motyka, & Balmert, 2020). As a result, adults in this demographic, specifically ones who graduated high school but did not attend college immediately after graduation, are at risk of having academic deficiencies that may negatively impact their academic progress (Kallison Jr., 2015). It is important for adult learners to be able to understand and execute certain reading, writing, mathematical, and technological skills in higher education because these disciplines serve as a foundation for a wide range of course offerings in college. However, Kallison Jr. (2015) acknowledges that this preparation of those skills goes beyond pure content knowledge, since other factors such as a student's academic behavior, like study skills or time management, also contribute to college readiness.

Online Learning with Adult Learners. Adult learners have dominated the market of online learning in the turn of the twenty first century, as nearly 28% of all adult learner student are involved in some sort of online education (Lederman, 2018). There are many motivating factors for adults to continue their education in an online setting. One of those is with the ease of access to technology. With the introduction of mobile technologies such as smart phones, tablets, and Wi-Fi hot spots, there is greater accessibility to course resources, content, and participation (Campbell, Jones, & Lambie, 2020). In 2012, 71% of United States households reported they have an internet connection, while 80% of adults reported they can access the internet either at home or via a mobile device (Merriam & Bierema, 2013, p.193). With adult learners need for flexible course offerings and schedules, this growth in online learning access allows adult learners greater ease in enrolling for courses to finish their degree requirements. Adult learners now are no longer constrained by location or a designated schedule in a traditional class setup, which can allow for participation to take place while multi-tasking at work or waiting for another activity to begin (Campbell, Jones, & Lambie, 2020). Another motivating factor for adult learners enrolling in online class settings is

the rise in programs being offered fully online. Through the rise of universities such as Southern New Hampshire and University of Phoenix, many limiting factors such as distance or enrollment requirements are mitigated as a result of these universities being fully remote. Furthermore, there is often reduced costs when enrolling in online classes as students need not to pay for fees such as campus room and board fees or other university access fees (Maryville University, 2016).

As online learning practices and technologies continue to be introduced in higher education to promote access and opportunities for all students, adult learners are often looking for ways to actively engage with the course materials and participants to get the most out of their educational experience. The 3E framework outlined by Squires (2018) can help better understand how adult learners can achieve this in an online educational setting. The first E of Enhance is adopting technology in a simple and effective way to increase their activity and self-responsibility (Squires, 2018). This can be done by ensuring that certain aspects of the technology such as font size, volume, and graphics can be introduced in ways that are easy to access and understand by adult learners. The second E of Extend is intended to have adult learners further use the technology in ways that help facilitate student's both individual and collaborative learning by increasing their control and choice (Squires, 2018). This can often be achieved by having adult learners engage in things such as discussion boards and reflections with peers in order to stimulate conversations and developments (Campbell, Jones, & Lambie, 2020). Finally, the third E of Empower is intended to have adult learners develop a use of the technology to reflect on how the knowledge created in these online platforms can be used in professional environments (Squires, 2018). The concept of empowerment usually comes in the students advanced schooling as they engage in concepts such as capstones or project papers to demonstrate their ability to use their knowledge and apply it to direct interests of theirs (Squires, 2018).

There are some challenges of online learning that are still present with adult learners. Some of those challenges include finding clearly defined assignments in the syllabus, receiving faculty responses to their needs, and getting timely feedback about their progress (Merriam & Bierema, 2013, p.197). With adults relying on relevant information and feedback best suited for their individual needs, it is crucial for educators to ensure they are meeting the needs of adult learners to make them feel comfortable and satisfied with the program they are enrolled in. For example, in a traditional classroom setting, adult learners would get face-to-face access with faculty and students typically 3 hours a week, while an online setting may not have regularly set meeting times (Campbell, Jones, & Lambie, 2020). This inability to meet on a regular basis with faculty can cause adult learners to feel frustrated in their ability to connect with the material and receive feedback on their progress (Merriam & Bierema, 2013, p.197). In addition to the content they are learning, adult learners often bring a wealth of knowledge and experiences to a classroom environment (Squires, 2018). If adult learners are not given the opportunity to share those experiences with others to draw connections and conclusions, adult learners can suffer in their ability to build relationships with faculty and peers (Merriam & Bierema, 2013, p.199). Finally, adult learners face a challenge in online learning in functional communication from the instructors. In a face-to-face setting, one's tone or body language can be a telling sign in how to interpret certain communication (Campbell, Jones, & Lambie, 2020). However, in an online setting the use of certain language through communication can be interpreted in multiple ways that could be misconceived by the student. Using pronouns such as "I" or "you", with the absence of a formal in person relationship can contribute to misjudgments by adult learners and lead to conveying blame, judgement, or a lack of empathy towards the student (Campbell, Jones, & Lambrie, 2020).

Impacts of Orientation Programs. College orientation programs are an important piece of an incoming students transition to college. These programs are frequently offered in the summertime to help students get situated to an unfamiliar environment (Chan, 2019). Orientation programs help reinforce students sense of belonging to the institution and can positively affect retention and graduation rates (Chan, 2019). Traditional orientation settings for first time students are often focused on college-aged students between ages 18-22. As a result, many of the resources offered in orientation programs include student life and housing, which can directly apply most to that age demographic (Miller, 2017). While these resources may be important for some adult learners, they may not be directly applicable to their current situations or needs on campus.

In order to help students successfully transition to college, most orientation programs allow students the opportunity to access multiple resources over multiple days. According to Chan's (2019) study on sixty-five orientation programs across the United States, almost 90% of universities studied preferred an in person only orientation format. This format allows students to come to the campus and engage with faculty and other students while gaining familiarity to the campus layout. In addition, about 80% of college orientation programs studied deliver their information in a traditional lecture or workshop- based format (Chan, 2019). Delivering information in a lecture style may be of benefit to adult learners returning to higher education due to face-to-face learning allowing adult learners the opportunity to understand the learner's responsibilities and have a chance to actively participate in the learning process (Brady, 2013). An overall analysis of orientation programs at universities aims at creating a connected environment by engaging students with a number of resources and social networks to help students achieve their goals (Chan, 2019).

When looking at orientation programs focused on adult learners, there are a number of needs that can be addressed in order to better ease their transition to college. Miller (2017) identifies a need for orientation programs for adult learners to be held frequently and often throughout the summer. With adult learners' other nonacademic commitments, such as work or childcare, it can be difficult for adult learners to attend an orientation program only offered on a certain day (Miller, 2017). In Chan's (2019) study on new student orientation program, of the 39 colleges offered an in-person orientation, only 1 university offered both an in person and an online option for students to attend. Offering this flexibility to adult learners could lead to greater attendance and participation in their orientation programs. In addition, online orientations allow for adult learners the ability to test the technology and make sure they have working access to university technological resources such as email, synchronous chats, and discussion boards (Scagnoli, 2001).

Another need that could be addressed to help adult learners benefit from orientation programs is the inclusion of faculty in the process. The inclusion of faculty and student support staff allows for a more complete and relevant discussion of adult learner concerns, needs, and issues (Miller, 2017). It also allows for adult learners to gain information on certain policies, practices, and procedures that would be most applicable to them in their academic journey (Miller, 2017). If adult learners wish to engage in a face-to-face orientation, orientation leaders should be concerned about making adult learners feel comfortable in their new environment. This can be done through highly interactive, small group formats that enables students to obtain support from each other and their program coordinators (Scagnoli, 2001).

Summary

The process of SDL involves the individual taking responsibility for the engagement and actions in their learning process (Knowles, 1975). Adult learners that able to find certain processes and learning styles that fit their educational circumstances are able to carve out concrete goals and intended learning outcomes in their educational journey (Merriam & Bierema, 2013). Being able to take responsibility for their learning also allows adult learners to take the information given and apply it directly to their given interests of their personal or professional lives. However, there can be struggles with SDL in adult learners if not given appropriate feedback or guidance on how to use that given information in their best interests (Morris, 2012).

Adult learners also have to often balance a number of commitments in their life in addition to their academics, including their professional careers, families, or any other personal interests they may be pursuing (Stevens, 2014). As a result, it is important to ensure that there are clear communication lines and access for adult learners to faculty to clarify any assignment details and express any concerns or needs (Kimmel, Gaylor, & Hayes, 2016). Adult learners are also engaging ever so more in online settings when enrolling in higher education. This can be attributed to an easier access to technology, such as the introduction of mobile devices and Wi-Fi hot spots (Campbell, Jones, & Lambie, 2020). As adult learners continue to access higher education in online settings, the focus remains on ensuring adult learners are comfortable with not only using online platforms but offering spaces for them to engage with others to promote discussion and development. Higher education institutions often have orientation programs in place to help incoming students get familiar with the campus and introduce them to available resources (Chan, 2019). When working with adult learners and their orientation process, institutions need to be aware of their certain needs when planning an orientation. Needs such as introduction to faculty,

ability to learn about campus resources that may be most appealing to the adult learner demographic, such as childcare or financial aid, and flexible offering of orientation dates both in an in-person setting and online to ensure the ability for participation from adult learners (Miller, 2017).

Conclusion

While higher education institutions have taken great strides in working with adult learners and taking their needs into consideration, there can be more accomplished in terms of an orientation process for adult learners. Creating an orientation program that offers flexibility and engagement with adult learners would serve a great benefit not only for the adult learner, but the institution as a whole. Institutions, most likely, have infrastructures and systems in place currently for orientations surrounding first year or traditional aged college students, so altering that process to better meet the needs of adult learners could be an accommodation that gets implemented fairly easily. This orientation should be looked at by institutions and higher education professionals as a way to promote SDL for the individual students, campus engagement, and overall empowerment of the student's educational journey.

The next chapter will describe components of an adult learner orientation program. The components will include methods to create, implement, and assess the program to ensure it is reaching its intended audience and success goals. Information will also be given on how to implement this orientation process in an online platform, as well as how it may be adapted at other institutions.

Chapter Three: Project Description

Introduction

As adult learners continue to enroll in higher education at a rapid pace, the need for universities to further develop and evolve their services for adult learners grows as well. Adult learners continue to face not only academic struggles on campus, but also a number of personal commitments and long-term obligations (Comings, 2007). These factors, such as child-care, work responsibilities, or outside personal ventures can result in adult learners feeling overwhelmed or underprepared to enter college and succeed (Carp et al., 1974). In addition, many of the college programs are developed and designed with the traditional-aged college student in mind, leaving adult learners to wonder if these resources or opportunities are available or relevant to them. One of the main programs in a student's academic journey is their orientation to the university, where they receive all the necessary information to become acclimated to the campus and begin their academic career. These orientation programs are often structured to allow students to make informed decisions, establish realistic goals, and assess their own personal circumstances to see how they will fit into the university (Wonacott, 2001). The research in chapters one and two provide evidence and suggest that offering orientation programs that can be specifically tailored to adult learners will be of benefit for both the short-term and long-term of the adult learner and the university. Orientation programs are vital to the success of adult learners, as many adult learners who drop out of educational programs do so in the first few weeks due to them not being properly oriented to the program and campus (Kereka, 2005). As a result, orientation programs should be flexible in an online format for adult learners to ensure they are able to access the necessary resources and information to adequately support them.

The purpose of the project is to create an online orientation program that is designed for adult learners enrolled at Grand Valley State University. Ideally, this online orientation program can be implemented at other universities and can tailor the specific resources or information to their unique adult learner population at their institution. The overall intent of this online orientation program is to increase an adult learner's confidence and preparedness in both their academic and personal profiles when enrolling at the university in order to progress further in their degree requirements. Merriam & Bierema (2013) suggest that confidence can be gained by adult learners taking more responsibility in their learning, mainly through SDL practices (p.69). The goal is to provide adult learners with relevant information and resources that will directly benefit them in order to help ease any concerns adult learners may have in enrolling in higher education. Even though the orientation will be provided in an online platform for adult learners, the intended goals and outcomes will remain similar to a traditional face-to-face orientation in acclimating students to the campus and engaging them with campus resources and personnel. The online orientation program will also have a focus on implementing adult learning theories and a unique lens of adult learner needs that were introduced in chapter two. Overall, this online orientation program will have greater benefits for adult learners as it will allow more adult learner students to access the necessary resources and information for academic achievement. Simply having this online orientation program available ensures that adult learners can have the ability to access and complete the program at a time that may be more convenient for them. The online orientation program can also help adult learners focus on more specific resources that may be more applicable to them versus some resources such as university housing, study abroad trips, or residence and student life activities that would usually dominate the conversation in a traditional orientation program.

The following chapter will introduce the online orientation program for adult learners at Grand Valley State University. The design of the program, the components of the information presented to adult learners, and the approaches used for implementation will be a focus. After those have been identified, the chapter will provide an evaluation system as well as conclusions to take away from the overall project. Finally, the chapter will include a look at how this online orientation program can be adopted, modified, and implemented at other universities.

Project Components

This online orientation program was created and designed in part to help adult learners transition effectively and be better prepared for college. This program can serve as a way for adult learners to not only become familiar with their campus and the resources available to them, but also can be an avenue for adult learners to express any concerns to student affairs professionals before enrollment. The institution selected for this online orientation program is Grand Valley State University, a public, liberal arts institution located in Allendale, Michigan. While GVSU was chosen for this specific project, this program can also serve other institutions in higher education in an effort to support adult learners. This online orientation program was created with the research presented in chapter two in mind of keeping adult learner theories and needs in the forefront of program development.

The online orientation program for adult learners at GVSU will consist of a series of online modules that cover both academic and personal services offered for adult learner students. When adult learners enroll at GVSU through the admissions office, students then will be given a link, via their student email account, to access the online orientation program. This online orientation program will feature a number of videos and documents available for adult learners to access and learn more about the institution and how their specific needs as adult learners can be fulfilled

during their time at GVSU. One important aspect of the module will be laying out clear expectations and instructions for the adult learner. One of the challenges that adult learners face when accessing technology is the lack of clarity on assignment instructions (Merriam & Bierema, 2013, p.197). Therefore, the first video of this module should clearly lay out what is expected from the adult learner as far as completion of the modules and how to effectively use the technology. The font types, sizes, and images should also be of appropriate sizes for adult learners to effectively engage with and understand the material presented.

In addition, there will be a five-question quiz at the end of each module that covers the information presented through the videos and documents that each adult learner will have to pass with 100% in order to move on to the next module in the program. One of the main features of this online orientation program will be its mandatory completion by adult learners at GVSU before their first semester begins. Mandatory orientation programs can serve as an asset for not only students by getting them acclimated to university resources and policies but can be an indicator for administrators in improving retention rates amongst students for future semesters at the university (Robichaud, 2016). In addition, by completing a mandatory orientation program, the adult learner can actively monitor their progress through self- monitoring. The adult learner can gauge their own ability in their cognitive process and understanding of the materials presented in the modules, allowing the adult learner to continually engage in their SDL (Merriam & Bierema, 2013, p.70). This could be exemplified through extrinsic motivation for the adult learner, as the mandate to complete the program could be looked at as necessity to complete in order to succeed in their higher education career. If adult learners are given direction in having to complete a program in order to progress, the extrinsic motivation for the adult learner can grow and continue to develop for further academic success (Merriam & Bierema, 2013).

The first module that adult learners will participate in includes academic resources at the university. Adult learners will first be introduced to academic advising at GVSU and learn how to make an appointment with an advisor, how to access their specific advising center's website, and how meeting with an academic advisor on a regular basis can benefit them. The next module will focus on tutoring services offered at GVSU, including, but not limited to the GVSU Speech Lab, the GVSU Writing Center, and the GVSU Statistics Center. It is important to emphasize that these centers not only offer in-person services, but also online services to accommodate the flexibility and convenience for adult learners while balancing their academic needs and personal obligations (Barker et.al, 1997). Another module that will be offered for adult learners in this online orientation program will cover the academic policies at GVSU. This will include how to access important GVSU resources such as the academic handbook, important student forms through the registrar's website, and the academic calendar to ensure they are informed of the important dates during the course of the semester. Finally, the last module in the academic services for adult learners will cover information on how to use GVSU technology systems, such as Blackboard, MyBanner, and Mypath. The importance of understanding how to use these systems will be crucial for a student's success at GVSU not only to enrich them in how to effectively navigate these common systems used by faculty and staff, but to ensure them a training in its use since some adult learners may be unfamiliar with these technology- based systems (Barker et al., 1997).

The second portion of the online orientation program for adult learners at GVSU will cover personal success resources available at the university. These resources are often barriers for entry into higher education, so it is important to make sure that the adult learner is aware of certain resources available to them in order to succeed (Miller, 2017). Some of these resources will include information on financial aid literacy and availability for adult learners, childcare options, and

transportation services getting to and from GVSU. As well, this module will include an overview of the free GVSU counseling services available to all students in order to educate adult learners on how to overcome any mental health issues they may be facing during their time in college. An important part of this module will include a section where adult learners can submit questions via a chat box to where they can ask any specific questions they may have about their unique circumstances. Having this ability to ask questions to faculty and staff will help ensure that the adult learner feels their needs are being met sufficiently and allows them to engage with faculty and staff during the orientation process, creating a sense of community and collaboration (Miller, 2017). This chat box should be monitored by the IT department who administered the online orientation program to the adult learner and can successfully deliver the question to the correct resource on campus to get the appropriate response.

Once adult learners complete the necessary modules and training quizzes within the online orientation program at GVSU, they will then be able fulfill the mandatory requirement from the university in completion of the program. As a result of this program completion, the hope is that adult learners will be able to effectively engage and adapt to new environments they have been introduced to on campus. In addition, the adult learners SDL can continue to evolve through the completion of this online orientation program as adult learners now have new knowledge as a result of them taking a greater responsibility of their learning processes (Merriam & Bierema, 2013, p.67). The motivation of the adult learner can also be accounted for in this program completion through goal- oriented learning. Adult learners will be able to complete their goal of attaining the skills and knowledge necessary to be successful in higher education through the completion of these learning modules, satisfying both the intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors presented for the adult learner (Merriam & Bierema, 2013, p.151). By completing this

program, adult learners will be able to fully access and utilize the resources covered in the program and navigate university systems and policies successfully. It should be noted that this online orientation program should be available for adult learners at the end of the program as a clickable and downloadable link that adult learners can access in case there is a need for reference or updates. Further, the online orientation program should be intended to be a living document within the university in order to continue to update resources on campus and compile information that will continue to serve adult learners in their success throughout college.

Project Evaluation

In order to successfully evaluate if the online orientation program meets its intended outcome and effectiveness, a survey will be included at the end of the program. The survey containing all the questions adult learners will be expected to answer can be viewed in Appendix A. This will ensure that adult learners have the ability to provide crucial feedback to approaches used in the orientation program. In addition, it will also ensure that all individuals who have completed the online orientation program will have had an opportunity to access the program to its entirety and are familiar with using the online platforms and technology.

The purpose of the survey will be to determine its effectiveness and usefulness for adult learners in the online orientation program, as well as to determine which information may need to be altered for future use. The survey can be used by administrators, instructors, and other student affairs professionals to recognize any barriers that may be present in the program and as a method to seek out strategies or programs that can help adult learners prevail in higher education (Comings & Cuban, 2007). Using online surveys can also have advantages such as the low cost of implementation, convenience for adult learners to respond on their own time, and the gathering of automatic responses to be used easily for assessment. These advantages can also

increase the willingness of the respondent in the survey is done with anonymity and with relative ease (Wright, 2005).

The survey will consist of 8 questions that the participants will be able to answer yes or no to. These questions will include if the participant felt the information was relative and timely to them, did they have ease of access to the online program, do they feel more comfortable in accessing resources at the university, and if they feel more proficient in using GVSU technology systems. After the 8 questions are answered by the individual, there will be an opportunity for respondents to provide open-ended feedback in the form of short answers. This will serve as a spot for adult learners to specifically outline anything they felt was extremely useful or relevant to them during the program, what may be missing currently in the program, or how this program has impacted their overall mindset of entering higher education. The online orientation program will be looked at as a success if the overall response rate of yes is over 70% in at least 5 of the 8 questions. With this information, student affairs professionals and universities can better evaluate their online orientation program to ensure it is accurately meeting its adult learner student population's intended needs and outcomes, while also implementing any necessary changes to improve its effectiveness for adult learners at GVSU.

Project Conclusions

Adult learners in higher education face a set of challenges that are often overlooked by universities and result in adult learners being a minoritized group on college campuses. Adult learners often face balancing multiple roles and identities in addition to their academic identity, including their work life responsibilities and personal or family obligations. As a result, adult learners, when enrolling in higher education, want to engage in activities that are directly impacting them and offer flexible options to accommodate their busy schedules. Adult learners are also

generally self- directed in their learning process, so it is important for student affairs professionals and universities to offer opportunities for adult learners to engage in self- directed learning and better develop their individual learning processes.

Orientation programs on college campuses offer a great opportunity for student affairs professionals to address the needs of their incoming students and present the relevant and necessary information needed for success. Many orientation programs are designed and intended for the traditional aged college student; therefore, it is important to create a program that can specifically identify and inform adult learners of their resources available at the university. By doing so, there is a benefit not only for the adult learner is gaining the information needed for satisfying their unique needs on campus, but for the university in growing retention amongst adult learners for the future at their university. Through the creation of an online orientation program for adult learners, it offers flexibility for adult learners to complete at their own pace while also focusing on relevant information for this specific student population. This can help ease concerns adult learners may face on academic procedures, personal accommodations, or technology usage when enrolling in higher education. Student affairs professionals can also monitor this online orientation program to assess the success on achieving the specific adult learner needs while also allowing for opportunities for growth and improvement as adult learners continue to dominate enrollment in higher education.

Plans for Implementation

This online orientation program could be adapted at GVSU through a number of avenues. First, GVSU should look to introduce this program to its advising centers on campus. While there is the Center for Adult and Continuing Studies on campus that predominately will work with adult learners, many of the other advising centers on campus will have experiences in working with

adult learners in their specific academic programs, thus making it important to be educated about how the program works and how to administer it to adult learners. For example, many advising centers will have a transfer advising and registration session for students who have already accrued college credits from other institutions. Adult learners can fall into this category and need to be introduced to the online orientation program during those sessions. Another area where GVSU should look to implement this program is in its admissions department. Often, adult learners may meet with an admissions counselor prior to their enrollment to confirm their decision on attending GVSU and gather relevant information about the university. Having admissions counselors educated about how to access the online orientation program and the specific details of its completion will be an important piece of information to deliver to adult learners to ensure the adult learner is fully aware of their requirement to complete it before their semester begins. Finally, this online orientation program should be created as a direct link that can be delivered to the adult learner in case there is need for further access. The initial link provided to the adult learner by their admissions counselor or academic advisor could be lost or misplaced, so it will be important for this link to be searchable on the GVSU website through the search bar function or through the IT department.

While this online orientation program is designed for specifically GVSU, it can be easily adapted by other institutions for their own use. For example, the content provided in the modules could be altered to meet the personal characteristics of the university if they wish to include a religious studies section or information about completing a fully online program versus being enrolled in a campus with in-person meeting sections. In addition, the specific technology systems that each university uses can be implemented in the modules to ensure the adult learner is fully informed and prepared to engage with once the semester begins. The collaboration between

universities on this program will ultimately help strengthen the overall quality and impact of online orientation programs in higher education, which will benefit adult learners in their transition to college by enriching them with relevant resources and information that will help improve their overall success in higher education.

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Appendix A

GVSU Adult Learner Online Orientation Survey

1. Was the information presented in the modules relevant to your needs as an adult learner on campus?
 - Yes
 - No
2. Was the information presented in the modules organized effectively and clearly?
 - Yes
 - No
3. Was the technology required for this online orientation program accessible and understanding to use?
 - Yes
 - No
4. Was the online orientation program effective in explaining how to use GVSU technology systems, such as MyBanner, MyPath, and Blackboard?
 - Yes
 - No
5. Do you feel more confident in using the GVSU technology systems in your learning after completion of the online orientation program?
 - Yes
 - No

6. Do you feel more confident on how to access and engage with GVSU resources presented in the modules?
 - Yes
 - No
7. Was the online orientation program available to you in an efficient amount of time to complete?
 - Yes
 - No
8. Do you feel the mandatory aspect of the online orientation program hampered the effectiveness of your learning?
 - Yes
 - No



The signature of the individual below indicates that the individual has read and approved the project of Justin Sims in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of M.Ed. in Higher Education, College Student Affairs Leadership.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Moira Ozias".

Moira L. Ozias, Project Advisor

29 April, 2021

Date

Accepted and approved on behalf of the
M.Ed. in Higher Education Program

Accepted and approved on behalf of the
Ed. Leadership and Counseling Dept.



Catherine Meyer-Looze

Karyn E. Rabourn, Graduate Program Director

Catherine Meyer-Looze, Unit Head

Date

Date