Striving for Success in a System That was not Built for Them: Supporting Adult Learners in Higher Education

Abstract

2014 Capstone Project

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This paper explores current research about adult learners in higher education. Building upon Knowles’ (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 1998) foundational work regarding adult learner characteristics and that of Cross (1981) regarding barriers faced by adult learners in higher education, this paper explores current research about how institutional retention of adult learners will benefit individuals and society, the distinctive characteristics of adult learners, the barriers adult learners face in higher education, and practices that can decrease barriers and increase retention of this rapidly growing population of students.

Keywords: Adult learners, andragogy, barriers to persistence, barriers to retention, global competitiveness, higher education, human capital, nontraditional students