

ATTRACTING QUALITY ADULT LEARNERS TO THE MARKETING CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the results of an exploratory study on why adult learners decide not to participate in college business programs. The primary objective was to better understand how administrators and marketing educators can attract and retain this important target market. Results indicate that lack of time and energy was the main barrier for these prospects. Child care responsibilities and limited course offerings were the second and third leading barriers.

According to the Chronicle of Higher Education, nearly half of all full and part-time college students are over 25 years of age. Since the number of "traditional" (under 25) students are declining on many campuses, these "adult learners" are a critical replacement. In addition, more of these adults will be majoring in business than in any other field. Plus, a survey in the Journal of Marketing Education reported that these adults were a valuable qualitative, as well as quantitative addition to the marketing classroom. More importantly, adult students are critical to the viability and success of marketing departments and business programs at many small, tuition-driven private colleges.

Given the importance of adult participants and prospects for marketing departments at some private colleges, surveys were conducted by marketing professors to better understand the barriers to attracting and retaining this important target market. The first phase of this research was aimed at the "prospects." (Typically, 80% of those who enroll are business majors, taking at least one course in marketing.) Recently, 1,200 adults attended informational meetings on an adult program at a small, undergraduate liberal arts college in a metropolitan area. Also, these prospects had individual con-

ferences with the admissions staff of the program. But for some reason, these prospects did not enroll.

To better understand why these adults decided not to participate in the program, a stratified random sample of 500 members of this group were sent a letter and a 24-item (five category Likert scale) questionnaire based on the "Learning Interests and Experiences of Adult Americans" instrument (Cross, 1981). The response was 159 questionnaires.

A factor analysis of the results showed that there were six major barriers that prevented these individuals from participating in this adult undergraduate program. The major barrier was a Lack of Resources (mean of 2.95): not enough time; not enough energy; job responsibilities; home responsibilities; takes too long to complete the program. The demands of Child Care (2.48) was the second factor to emerge. Limitations in Course Offerings (2.19) and course availability was the third factor. Fourth was Cost/Benefit Ratio (1.88): This dealt with the attendance and degree requirements vs. the perceived pay-off of the program. Fifth was Bad Experience (1.64): low grades in the past; afraid I'm too old; don't enjoy studying; tired of schools and classrooms. The least important factor dealt with Institutional (1.35) issues: no transportation; too much red tape. These factors explained 58% of total variance.

The results of this "prospects" survey will be combined with a later "participants" survey to help college administrators develop programs, delivery systems, counseling support, and promotion activities. Finally, it will put marketing educators in a better position to attract and retain high quality adult learners to their marketing classroom.