

Chapter 18

Engaging the Adult Learner Through Graduate Learning Communities

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ABSTRACT

Providing a college education is important to the advancement of the United States and at the international level. A highly competitive 21st century workforce is in demand, and there is an increased need for graduate degrees but the adult learners and the learning venues are changing dramatically. This chapter addresses the need for graduate education, the trends and changing demographics of adult learners or graduate students, and the use of graduate learning communities to satisfy the changing needs of those served by colleges and universities.

INTRODUCTION

Graduate student education is an important link to a well prepared 21st century workforce (Council of Graduate Schools, 2010). College and university graduate programs which actively support the adult learner account for 660,000 master's and doctoral degrees each year (Snyder, Dillow, & Hoffman, 2009). While this figure might appear to be large it equates to only 8.8% of the U.S. domestic

population and of that number approximately 1% are doctoral degree holders (Bell, 2009b). Adult learners are commonly defined as individuals aged 25 or older and the National Center for Educational Statistics considers these learners as non-traditional students. They may have delayed post-secondary education enrollment; are typically financially independent of parents; they work full-time; and have dependents other than a spouse (Adult Learning, 2008).

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Global demands recognize the critical need for a talented, technologically savvy workforce with the social and intellectual skills to successfully navigate an ever growing cyber community (McCarthy & Samors, 2009; McPherson & Shulenburg, 2009). Graduate schools are an important link to our nation's mission to develop a competitive workforce. As Debra W. Stewart, (2010), President of the Council of Graduate Schools, stated,

Graduate education in the United States has been an enormously successful enterprise, serving the vital scientific, cultural and economic needs of the national and global community. Our graduate schools are epicenters of discovery, innovation, and application, leading to advancements that affect every one of us. (para. 1)

Such an enterprise can be nurtured in graduate programs (Maki, 2009) and in particular through graduate learning communities (Gardner, 2009; Rovai & Jordan, 2004; Tokuno, 2008).

Learning communities have shown great promise in increasing student satisfaction, retention, enhanced academic development, strengthening of the college curriculum and teaching, connectiveness to faculty and peers through research and projects, engagement and motivation and increased recognition of the need to collaborate with others (Smith, MacGregor, Matthews, & Gabelnick, 2004). In learning communities the curriculum is structured "...so that students are more actively engaged in a sustained academic relationship with other students and faculty over a longer period of time than in traditional course settings" (Minkler, 2002, p. 1). Researchers have found positive results when learning communities were used in the areas of retention, academic success and student satisfaction in undergraduate programs (Tinto, 2006; Zhao & Kuh, 2004) but there is less evidence available regarding the use of learning communities in graduate programs. Although it is difficult to find large national studies concerning the effects on graduate programs, current studies are encouraging (Gardner, 2009; Tokuno, 2008; Pratt & Tokuno, 2008). There is a

growing body of knowledge concerning graduate learning communities which are also referred to as a community of practice (COP) (Dabbagh, 2007; Stacey, Smith, & Barty, 2004). Dabbagh (2007) stated that "members of a COP understand that a social mind is at work and that knowledge is a shared intellectual capital" (p. 220). Learning is social and a critical tenet when learning communities are to be implemented within distance education programs and affiliated coursework (Dabbagh & Bannan-Ritland, 2005; Wenger & Snyder, 2000).

Graduate students want programs which accommodate their busy lives. These adult learners are requesting class scheduling which will allow them to balance fulltime careers, family and education efforts. Distance education is proving to be one way to meet these student needs. The Sloan Consortium reported that in 2009 there were 4.6 million students enrolled in an online course (Allen & Seaman, 2010). In addition, colleges and universities are setting goals to become more entrepreneurial and distance education is providing an avenue for success. For example, one public land grant institution reported over \$5 million in revenues for 2009-2010. Higher education institutions are realizing the possibilities of technology and income production as well as the need to produce quality distance education experiences for learners. To do so warrants understanding demographic trends of graduate students and how they relate to best practices of adult learning theory and organizational contexts such as in graduate learning communities.

This chapter identifies current trends in graduate student demographics and suggests how graduate student needs can be met through the application of adult learning theory and the use of learning communities. In addition it will explore recent developments in the use of online learning communities. The intent is to identify how online learning communities have a strong theoretical base and can be used to engage today's graduate adult learners.

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