Articles

Academic Decision Making Among Adult Learners: Personal and Institutional Factors

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ABSTRACT

This study, designed with considerable input from adult learners, focuses on influences that affect academic decision making. Using questionnaires and selected interviews, information was gathered on institutional and personal influences on academic decision making for current and future courses, along with demographic information. Three quarters of the respondents were under 39 years of age and were looking to their university

RÉSUMÉ

Cette étude, conçue avec la participation considérable d'apprenants adultes, s'articule autour des influences ayant des répercussions sur les prises de décisions académiques. En utilisant des questionnaires et des entrevues sélectionnées, on a recueilli des renseignements démographiques ainsi que d'autres se rapportant aux influences institutionnelles et personnelles ayant eu un effet sur les prises de décisions académiques concernant les cours actuels et

education to provide knowledge and skills needed for future job opportunities. Within-group analysis revealed a stronger influence on academic decision making from the institution rather than from personal influences, despite a fairly strong positive correlation of the two sets of variables. This pattern was consistent across groups, with no differences being attributed to part- or full-time status or to year in program. Open-ended questions on the questionnaire, as well as follow-up individual interviews, allowed for the input of suggestions to improve the experiences of adult learners in post-secondary institutions. Additional preliminary course information and increased accessibility to courses and services were common themes. In general, the university experience had been very positive; however, some students expressed satisfaction at being invited to contribute suggestions that, if implemented, could improve the experience of future adult learners.

futures. Les trois quarts des participants de l'étude avaient moins de 39 ans et comptaient sur leur formation universitaire pour leur fournir les connaissances et les abilités nécessaires pour répondre aux perspectives d'emplois futures. Une analyse au sein des groupes a révélé que les prises de décisions académiques étaient influencées par l'institution plutôt que d'influences personnelles malgré une corrélation assez fortement positive entre les deux groupes de variables. Cette tendance est consistante parmi les groupes, avec aucune différence attribuable aux étudiants à temps partiel ou à temps plein ou même à leur année dans un programme. Des questions ouvertes au questionnaire, ainsi que des entrevues de suivi individuelles, ont permis l'intervention de questions pouvant améliorer les expériences des apprenants adultes dans des institutions postsecondaires. Des renseignements préliminaires additionnels sur les cours et une plus grande accessibilité aux cours et aux services faisaient partie des thèmes communs. En général, l'expérience universitaire avait été très positive; cependant, quelques étudiants ont exprimé une satisfaction à se faire inviter à contribuer des suggestions qui, si implantées, pourraient améliorer l'expérience de futures apprenants adultes.

INTRODUCTION

Although adult learners constitute a significant group within the university population and attract the attention of researchers on a wide variety of issues, many gaps remain in our knowledge about how these students fare within the university system. In part, this is because adult learners present such a variable profile, ranging in age from those in their early twenties, for whom the disruption of formal education has been relatively brief, to seniors who see university education as the fulfilment of personal dreams. Such diversity makes it difficult to generalize about adult learners; however, if universities are to best serve this population, more studies that hear directly from adult learners are needed (Queeney, 1995). The focus of this study, therefore, was adult learners. Specifically, it was about their academic decision making and the personal and/or institutional factors that facilitate or hinder their progress toward completion of a particular degree.

Academic decision making is a key activity for students. To date, research has focused primarily on the link between academic decision making and career choices, an obvious factor in determining the academic paths taken by many students. Yet, other important institutional and personal factors may play more immediate roles in determining a student's eventual academic path. Kuh, Blake, Douglas, and Ramin-Gyurnek (1995), for example, highlighted one institutional influence on student choice—the "funnel effect" of limited-enrolment programs. Some programs attract far more students than the university can eventually accommodate; consequently, those students who are denied admission to their program of choice must revise their academic and vocational goals. Transferring to another academic program, after having invested time and effort toward the limited-enrolment program, is not always easy, especially if it involves changing faculties or taking additional courses. This block on academic aspirations can be very disturbing initially, and students need time to assess acceptable alternatives and to reach a positive resolution of the problem. For those who have sacrificed jobs to go back to school with the explicit goal of entering a limited-enrolment program, institutional roadblocks can be very traumatic and may result in complete withdrawal from the institution.

Another institutional problem for adult learners is that the four-year, residential institution focuses on traditional students entering directly from secondary school (Bergquist, 1995). The needs of adult learners, commuter

students, and minority-group students have far less impact on the planning decisions of institutions. In recent years, as difficult decisions have been made because of budget shortfalls, courses specifically targeted to part-time adult learners have tended to be cut, contributing to a drop in part-time enrolment figures (O'Heron & Drewes, 1998). Budget cuts may have reduced the accessibility to desired courses for some adult learners.

Budget constraints have led to another general institutional trend that may be working against adult learners—a move to larger classes. Lam (1985) found evidence that instructor-learner interaction through discussion was particularly important to promoting greater understanding of the subject matter for adult learners. Their need for active involvement may be related to their desire to apply their considerable life experiences to their education (Guyatt, Owen, Basso, Wilgar, & Meltz, 1996) through an "investment of self," which Tennant and Pogson (1995) identify as typical of adult learners in the classroom. Larger classes generally reduce opportunities for class discussion and so may be less effective for adult learners.

Personal barriers to education have long been recognized for adult learners. Fisher (1997) points to the ever-present problem of cost of education, with financial aid programs continuing to fail part-time and adult students. She suggests that innovative child-care programs are necessary to support the academic success of many of these students. Indeed, child-care needs have been identified by a number of researchers as a key gender-based difference influencing academic decision making among adult students (Bishop, Bauer, & Becker, 1998; Fisher, 1997; Murphy & Archer, 1996; Wilson, 1994). To varying degrees, universities have traditionally provided general support services to students in order to facilitate their access to and success in the educational system. Although these services have been especially critical to reducing the impact of personal constraints on the participation of adult learners, they need to evolve to meet the needs of the current student population. In a comprehensive assessment of the educational needs of learners into the 21st century, James (1999) makes several recommendations that reflect the changing faces of post-secondary institutions and the impact of technology on the delivery of courses and support services.

The study described in this paper focused on adult learners and their academic decision making. Specifically, it investigated the relative strengths of two suites of contributing factors: the first included the influences and requirements of the institution itself; the second included the personal goals

and needs of students. Information on the demographic background of the participants was also gathered. The study took place at a large university that offers a wide variety of undergraduate programs. The study sample spanned three undergraduate years, including both full- and part-time adult learners, thus allowing for comparison across groups.

In addition to the use of a questionnaire, individual interview data were collected from 12 participants in the study. This method follows the work of Tierney (1991), who argued convincingly that interviews provide valuable information—especially on perceptions and attitudes—that is unavailable through other data sources such as questionnaires. Structured interviews provide elaboration of questionnaire responses and help to fill any information gaps.

METHOD

Participants

A stratified random sample of 300 students admitted under the university's admission category of "mature student" was selected from the registrar's records. This category is reserved for people who do not meet the standard entrance requirements based on academic achievement. Although some students may have done some academic upgrading prior to entering university, the "mature student" will not normally have been in full-time education within the four years prior to admission.

Because many adult learners are part-time students, and because we wanted our sample to cover the range of student experience, participants were assigned to groups based on the total number of courses they had completed, rather than on the number of years they had attended the institution. Of the 300 students in the sample, 100 were currently enrolled in their 1st to 5th course, 100 in their 6th to 10th course, and 100 in their 11th to 15th course; these course totals are equivalent to the first, second, and third program years, respectively. Within each group, participants were also selected based on their current status: 50 part-time and 50 full-time students.

Materials

The questionnaire that was developed for use in this study included demographic items to provide descriptive background on characteristics such as age groups, previous academic history, and reasons for pursuing a

university education at this particular university. The items that measured the relative importance of institutional and personal factors affecting participants' academic decision making explored two time periods: (a) decisions taken when choosing the courses in which they were currently enrolled, and (b) decisions taken for the upcoming academic year. The rationale for including these two periods was that they would be a measure of the consistency, or otherwise, of the decision-making process. For each time period, nine items measured institutional influences and seven items measured personal influences. For each student, average scores for institutional influences and personal influences on academic decision making were calculated for each time period. These average values were analyzed for within-group and between-group variations. Four open-ended questions provided the students with opportunities to provide additional comments.

A group of currently registered adult learners had considerable input into the development of the questionnaire. Discussion about their experience with academic decision making led to the development of the various items. Working versions of the questionnaire were trial tested on another group of currently registered adult learners. The final version of the questionnaire demonstrates excellent face validity. Because of their familiarity with the goals of the study, none of the students involved with the development and testing of the questionnaire were included in the research sample.

Design and Procedure

Two types of data collection were used: a questionnaire and follow-up interviews. A questionnaire was mailed to each of the 300 students randomly selected for the study. Mail-outs took place in February, immediately prior to the counselling period during which students were actively making decisions about academic progression. To encourage a high return rate, the names of all students returning questionnaires by a stated deadline were entered in a draw for a $200 gift certificate from the university bookstore.

Participants were asked to indicate on their questionnaire if they were willing to be involved in a follow-up interview, the second type of data collection. In-depth, structured interviews were conducted with a sub-sample of 12 students in order to collect anecdotal information that would elaborate on the questionnaire responses and provide extra details. Only students who had completed more than half of the courses they needed for

graduation were included in this sample. Those fitting this criterion were telephoned in random order until the required sample size was obtained. All 12 students were asked to respond to the same set of questions.

Responses from the questionnaires were entered into a statistical program: descriptive statistics were calculated for demographic characteristics and decision-making processes, and inferential statistics were employed to identify any differential effects of institutional and personal factors affecting academic decision making. Responses to the open-ended questions on the questionnaire were evaluated for additional information. Audiotapes of the in-depth interviews were reviewed to identify key issues that would add to the information gathered through the questionnaires.

RESULTS

Background

The overall return rate for the surveys was 33% (27% return rate from part-time students and 39% from full-time students). In terms of gender, 58% of the respondents were female and 42% male. Younger adult learners predominated; 75% of respondents were 20–39 years old, 24% were 40–59 years old, and only 1% were 60 years old or over. The highest level of education prior to entering university was high school (51%), community college (38%), and "other" (10%). There was a considerable range in the number of years between last attending school and beginning university: less than 1 year, 26%; 1–5 years, 32%; 6–10 years, 15%; 11–20 years, 18%; and more than 20 years, 8%. Lastly, 70% of respondents said they had engaged in academic upgrading within the last five years.

Several questions tapped into the decision-making process for entering university. As to the length of time that respondents had been thinking about a university education prior to admission: for 4%, it was less than a month; for 16%, 1–6 months; for 20%, 7–12 months; and for 60%, longer than a year. In addition, 4% of respondents had considered going back to high school instead of university, 43% had considered community college, 34% had considered "other" educational options, and 19% had only considered university. Almost half of the respondents (49%) had used the university's counselling services before entering the university. When asked about their reasons for attending university (respondents could select more than one option), 64% reported that gaining knowledge and skills was of

major importance to them, 58% were fulfilling a personal dream, 44% wanted a different job than their current one, 39% had a very definite career goal, and 7% needed a degree for their current job. When asked why they chose to attend their current university, 72% (the overwhelming response) said they already lived / worked in the same city, 37% said the university offered programs in which they were interested, 22% had responded to the university's reputation, and 15% had been encouraged to attend by family or friends.

When respondents were asked if their academic program plans had changed while attending university, a majority (62%) said they had. The major reasons given for those changed plans were as follows: found a more attractive academic program (20%), changed career / personal goals (15%), found courses were unavailable (7%), failed to meet the requirements (6%), and disliked content (5%).

In terms of their current status, 49% of respondents were in the Faculty of Social Science, 26% in Science, 19% in Arts, 1% in Engineering, and 5% in "other faculty"; in addition, 20% of respondents were in honors programs, 53% were in general programs, and 22% were as yet "undeclared." At the time they responded to the questionnaire, 4% of the students were not taking courses; 33% were taking $^1/_2$ to 1 course; 11% were taking 1 $^1/_2$ to 2 courses; 13% were taking 2 $^1/_2$ to 3 courses; 16% were taking 3 $^1/_2$ to 4 courses; and 22% were taking 4 $^1/_2$ to 6 courses.

Institutional and Personal Influences on Academic Decision Making

The mean scores for the nine institutional and seven personal influences on academic decision making are displayed in order of rank for the entire group (see Table 1). The mean value for each item combined responses about both current and future courses. The response scale ranged from 0 (this factor not applicable) to 3 (this was a major factor in my choice of this course).

For the data on current courses, within-group t-tests were performed to evaluate the relative strengths of institutional and personal influences on academic decision making in the six subgroups, based on registration status and number of courses taken. Table 2 indicates that for all six groups, the mean for the institutional influences was higher than that for personal influences; only two of the six groups showed a statistically significant difference between these two variables. For part-time students with 1–5 courses, institutional influences ($\underline{M} = 1.25$, $\underline{SD} = .56$) were significantly higher than personal influences [($\underline{M} = 0.87$, $\underline{SD} = .40$), $\underline{t}$ (18) = 4.437, $\underline{p}$<.001].

Table 1:   Institutional and Personal Influences on Choice of Courses

Type*	Rank	Item	Mean	SD
I	1	Subject matter of course	2.267	0.9
P	2	My personal and career goals	2.224	0.9
I	3	Availability of the course (time/day courses are offered)	1.977	1.2
P	4	My level of confidence that I could succeed in this course	1.876	1.1
I	5	Delivery mode (correspondence, on-campus)	1.471	1.3
P	6	Current money concerns	1.329	1.1
I	7	The mandatory requirements for my program	1.296	0.9
I	8	My current grades	1.290	1.5
P	9	Time needed for family/significant others	1.282	1.5
I	10	The type of exams and other forms of evaluation used in this course	1.187	1.0
I	11	Quality and/or type of teaching	1.099	1.1
I	12	Personal contact with professors and/or teaching assistants	1.045	1.0
P	13	Demands of current job/career	1.032	1.3
I	14	Counselling and other student support services	0.883	1.0
P	15	Personal health	0.727	1.0
P	16	Interaction with friends/peers at the university	0.558	0.8

N=98

* I = Academic/institutional influence
 P = Non-academic/personal/social influence

For full-time students with 11–15 courses, the same pattern was observed, with institutional influences ($\underline{M}$ = 1.21, $\underline{SD}$ = .68) again higher than personal influences [($\underline{M}$ = 1.00, $\underline{SD}$ = .70), $\underline{t}$ (18) = 2.389, $\underline{p}$<.05]. Positive correlation of the two variables was at a significant level for five of the six groups under investigation (see Table 2).

The two independent variables of institutional and personal influences on academic decision making in current courses were entered separately into analyses of variance in order to investigate the influences of group membership (full- vs. part-time; and number of courses completed: 1–5, 6–10, 11–15) on these variables. No significant differences were identified among the groups for either variable (see Table 3).

Table 3: Across-group Comparison of Institutional and Personal Influences on Academic Decision Making for Current Courses

Groups	df	Institutional Influences		Personal Influences	
		F	Sig	F	Sig.
Status (PT vs. FT)	1	0.167	.683	0.882	.350
Number of courses completed (1–5, 6–10, 11–15)	2	0.400	.671	0.416	.661
Status/Courses	2	2.984	.056	2.903	.060

For the data on future courses, within-group t-tests were used to evaluate the relative strengths of institutional and personal influences on academic decision making in the six subgroups under investigation. Table 4 shows that, for five of the six groups, the mean for institutional influences was higher than the mean for personal influences, with three of the groups showing a significant difference between these two variables: part-time students with 6–10 courses, institutional influences ($\underline{M}$ = 1.91, $\underline{SD}$ = .74) and personal influences [($\underline{M}$ = 1.50, $\underline{SD}$ = .56), $\underline{t}$ (18) = 2.777, $\underline{p}$<.05]; full-time students with 1–5 courses, institutional influences ($\underline{M}$ = 1.99, $\underline{SD}$ = .50) and personal influences [($\underline{M}$ = 1.39, $\underline{SD}$ = .57), $\underline{t}$ (14) = 4.390, $\underline{p}$<.001]; full-time students with 6–10 courses, institutional influences ($\underline{M}$ = 1.70, $\underline{SD}$ = .42) and personal influences [($\underline{M}$ = 1.31, $\underline{SD}$ = .39), $\underline{t}$ (19) = 3.255, $\underline{p}$<.01]. Positive

Table 2: Within-group Comparison of Institutional and Personal Influences on Academic Decision Making for Current Courses

Regis-tration Status	Number of courses	N	Institutional influences		Personal influences		t value	Significance (2-tailed)	Correlation of I/P influences
			MEAN	SD	MEAN	SD			
Part-time	1-5	19	1.25	1.25	0.87	.40	4.437**	.000	.751**
	6-10	12	1.04	1.04	0.96	.61	0.583	.572	.644*
	11-15	10	1.56	1.56	1.33	.71	2.025	.074	.864**
Full-time	1-5	16	1.33	1.33	1.20	.65	1.238	.235	.777**
	6-10	20	1.38	1.38	1.31	.54	0.523	.606	.418
	11-15	19	1.21	1.21	1.00	.70	2.389*	.028	.848**

** $p < .001$
* $p < .05$

Table 4: Within-group Comparison of Institutional and Personal Influences on Academic Decision Making for Future Courses

Registration Status	Number of courses	N	Institutional influences		Personal influences		t value	Significance (2-tailed)	Correlation of I/P influences
			MEAN	SD	MEAN	SD			
Part-time	1-5	15	2.01	.44	1.81	.50	1.914	.076	.644**
	6-10	19	1.91	.74	1.50	.56	2.777	.012*	.526*
	11-15	15	1.61	.60	1.72	.60	0.663	.518	.350
Full-time	1-5	15	1.99	.50	1.39	.57	4.390	.001***	.525*
	6-10	10	1.70	.42	1.31	.39	3.255	.010**	.565
	11-15	7	2.40	1.20	1.84	.35	1.531	.177	.589

*** p< .001
** p< .01
* p< .05

correlation of the two variables was at a significant level for three of the groups under investigation (see Table 4).

The two dependent variables of institutional and personal influences on academic decision making for future courses were entered separately into analyses of variance in order to investigate the influences of group membership on these variables. No significant differences were identified among the groups for either variable (see Table 5).

Table 5:   Across-group Comparison of Institutional and Personal Influences on Academic Decision Making for Future Courses

Groups	df	Institutional Influences		Personal Influences	
		F	Sig	F	Sig.
Status (PT vs. FT)	1	0.000	.984	2.240	.139
Number of courses completed (1–5, 6–10, 11–15)	2	2.311	.106	2.562	.084
Status/Courses	2	0.824	.443	1.688	.192

Four open-ended questions invited respondents to comment on influences on their academic decision making not already covered by the questionnaire. Many students took this opportunity for input, but in the main, they elaborated on items already included on the questionnaire. The first question probed the factors that affected decisions about the courses in which the students were currently registered. Personal factors, for example, needs of significant others, were evident in comments such as: "My planning must take into account my wife's schedule," and "The children are gone, job is boring, and I now have more free time!" Some comments added details about skill development goals of the students. One student, for example, wished to improve general reading and writing skills, another wanted to improve Spanish skills (to be more globally mobile), and another hoped to develop general communication and writing skills.

Two questions probed the factors affecting academic decisions for the upcoming academic year. As might be expected, many responses reflected institutional requirements, with comments such as: "I must get

prerequisites to take course of interest," and "I must take a certain course load to finish my degree this summer." Comments indicated uncertainty related to availability of courses, class times, mode of delivery, and prerequisites for programs of choice: "[I will register for courses] if my required courses are offered in the evenings"; "The course times will reflect the number of courses I take"; "I shall see if the course I want is correspondence with the Internet"; and "I am waiting for acceptance to the Women's Studies Program." Personal uncertainty was also evident, the most common concern being the ability to pay for a university education: "If I qualify for the Student Assistance Plan, I will continue in university," and "Because of my financial situation, I will have to work and cut down on my course load."

   The fourth question asked students to suggest services that could help them with academic decision making but were not currently provided at the university. Responses reflected traditional concerns of adult learners and covered a broad array of services, some of which were already in place but not totally satisfying students' needs. They included requests for improved child-care facilities, for more variety and increased availability of distance education courses, for smaller classes, and for more evening classes on campus. Extended hours for many university services, such as counselling, the Registrar's Office, and their professors' office hours, were also requested. With increased access to the Internet, many students would like on-line application forms, more detailed course descriptions, and an interactive tutoring site. Several students suggested they should receive academic credit for work experience, and they wanted more program-specific employment counselling. Peer support groups were mentioned several times, with one student citing "isolation" as a problem. One shift worker, with limited time availability, wanted alternative dates to write examinations. Additional suggestions included providing a drive-through deposit box for returning library materials, paying for courses using a credit card, increasing opportunities for providing feedback to the university, and adopting the "European" model for failed courses, in which final exams are rewritten without the student having to retake the course.

THE IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS

In the 12 individual interviews, each of which lasted for about one hour, students were reminded of the questionnaire items and asked to comment further on any of them. Personal items generated the most immediate

responses, although input was also provided on institutional influences on academic decisions. Two personal influences in particular stood out: time needed for family and significant others; and the demands of a current job / career. Half of those interviewed were care-givers of either children or adults; thus, the need to juggle the multiple responsibilities of being student and care-giver was the most common theme during the interviews (cited 6 times). The care-giver role took priority over everything else, especially if a child was involved, and most especially a sick child. Students discussed the need for an appreciation of their circumstances from professors. One student said that her professor was not willing to make any sort of accommodation for her when her child was ill, and so she was unable to meet an assignment deadline.

Six of the students interviewed worked full-time and three worked part-time. In addition to juggling the demands of school and a job, one student discussed how career uncertainty was affecting her feelings and making it difficult to sustain her motivation for school. Personal pressure, related to juggling work, school, and care-giving duties, was mentioned frequently. One student felt she was under considerable pressure to earn her degree, to remain competitive with her current company, to work full-time, and to provide care-giving. She talked about the challenge of finding enough time, coping with physical tiredness, and overcoming difficulties due to limited course offerings. Others spoke about maintaining their motivation over the number of years it would take to complete their program. One student noted, "It's very daunting. In four years, I've completed five credits; it takes a long time." Another student said, "Sometimes I tell my friends that I can't understand why I'm doing this."

Money was another personal concern, and the cost of taking courses was mentioned four times. One student, who was taking her degree for intellectual enjoyment and not for a specific career objective, said she would not start a degree today because of the costs involved, but felt committed to completing her degree.

Of the institutional influences on academic decision making, the availability of courses was seen as a limiting factor (cited 5 times). Among the problems mentioned were courses being listed in the academic calendar but not offered in a given year, and the limited variety of courses available through evening classes. One student had been waiting several years to take a particular course; whenever she wanted to register for it, it was not offered.

Type of teaching was a factor for some students. Two of them talked about the enjoyment of academic discussion in the classroom but both found this occurred only in smaller classes. Some students thought that large classes limited opportunities for contact with the professor, contact that was highly prized by many of them. For example, one student received a letter from her professor encouraging her to consider an area of concentration in his department. Such an acknowledgement really made a difference to her.

Most students chose their courses based solely on the academic calendar, although some also spoke with academic counsellors. Few sought out additional information, such as professor evaluations, which is readily available from a variety of sources.

During their interview, all students were asked about experiences that had positively affected their academic decisions. For some, the positives started early. Five students said that being accepted by the university was exciting; it was as though this was an unexpected surprise for them. This surprise at their own accomplishments was echoed by several others. Three talked about the excitement of doing unexpectedly well, with one student describing her delight upon receiving an A+ on her first course. Another student, unable to take her first-choice course, took astronomy instead, and much to her surprise, was delighted with her experience. A student who found his niche in his academic program and did well on his courses said that his expectations of his own performance increased with his accomplishments, with both positive and negative consequences. On the one hand, his motivation increased; on the other hand, he had to deal with the extra pressure he placed on himself. Others enjoyed being able to set their own pace, being guided by their own personal goals and enjoying the outcomes, with one student commenting that she felt she was gaining specific knowledge and skills that she could apply every day. Such personal growth and improved self-esteem were noted by several of the students as positive effects of their university experience.

Discussion

The questionnaire return rate of 33% was in line with expectations for this method of data collection. The randomly selected, albeit small, sample and the students who chose to participate were representative of the university as a whole, with regard to faculties and types of programs. However, because costs limited sample size, the actual numbers available for

statistical analysis were relatively small. Therefore, it is important to look at trends in the data as well as at any statistically significant differences across groups.

The demographic information from this study provided a snapshot of adult learners at this place and time. As with other studies of adult learners (Guyatt et al., 1996), female students outnumbered males. Most students chose to attend this particular institution because they already lived in the city. The data emphasized the youthfulness of the majority of adult learners—75% of them were under 39 years of age. The number of years reported between high school and university suggest that many left high school well before graduation, perhaps accounting for the 70% of this group who reported academic upgrading over the last five years. It is not surprising, then, that 60% of the students had been considering a university education for longer than a year or that 64% were seeking knowledge and skills from their university education.

The majority of students in this study (62%) changed their original plans for their academic program once in university. One explanation is that many students at the outset of their degree programs are not aware of the wide array of options open to them; after experiencing a variety of disciplines, students are better able to follow their personal line-of-best-fit. Undoubtedly, the issue of limited-enrolment programs is also a factor; the high grades needed for admission to programs such as medicine and social work create a barrier to some students' academic aspirations.

The major focus of this study was to evaluate the relative strengths of institutional and personal influences on academic decision making. The ranked ordering of the constituent items on the questionnaire (Table 1) shows that neither set of influences dominates, although five of the top eight items are institutional. The top-ranked item was course content; presumably, personal interest in ideas and skill development are equally important to students. The lowest-ranked item was interaction with friends/peers at the university, something that deserves further investigation as to whether this is driven by personal choice or experience. Many adult learners have so little extra time outside of their personal commitments that they choose to minimize their social interaction on campus. Others, however, who would enjoy peer-group company and support, sometimes experience difficulty in finding and maintaining friendships with other students.

When comparing across- and within-group differences for institutional and personal influences on academic decision making, there are no

differences across the groups. This means that no effects can be attributed to the comparison of groups based on status (part or full time) or year in program, measured by the number of courses completed (1–5, 6–10, and 11–15). Both types of influences are experienced similarly by all adult learners in the university. A different trend is evident, however, when looking at within-group differences.

In 11 of the 12 within-group comparisons (6 for each current and future course), mean values for institutional influences are higher than those for personal influences, although the differences only reach statistical significance in 5 groups. In the one exception where personal influences are higher than institutional influences, this difference is not statistically significant. For current courses, institutional influences are significantly more important for two groups (PT 1–5 and FT 11–15); for future courses, they are significantly higher for three different groups (PT 6–10, FT 1–5, and FT 6–10). No one group shows a consistent pattern of significance across the two time periods. This may be related to the sample size, as smaller groups are less likely to reach statistical significance. A tentative conclusion at this point, therefore, is that for within-group comparisons, there is a general trend for institutional influences on academic decision making to be more important for students than personal influences.

For all 12 groups, institutional and personal influences are positively correlated: 5 groups at a statistically significant level for current courses, and 3 groups for future courses. This correlation may be a reflection of students' general attitudes, with some students indicating that both sets of influences are important to them, while others are indicating both are of lesser importance. Even with this pattern, however, the within-group differences show a differential in the two suites of influences, with institutional influences predominating at this group level.

The responses to the open-ended questions on the questionnaire provide further insight into the interrelationship of institutional and personal influences on academic decision making. For these adult learners, many with jobs and families to consider, time-tabling of courses is a major concern. As those who work with adult learners so often hear, students are not always able to choose their preferred course or even their discipline; they must find an academic path that works with all of their other commitments. In addition, their concerns about services (limited child care, and evening access to professors, counsellors, and staff in the Registrar's Office) again emphasize the personal/institutional correlation. Responses also indicate that some students now recognize the potential of the Internet

to meet some of these needs; more and more "form filling" is being done on-line, saving unnecessary trips to campus, and e-mail is providing very immediate contact, making the university a more personal place.

The in-depth interviews covered much of the same ground as the questionnaire and validated its design. Although both influences were elaborated, personal influences—issues closest to the heart—were what students wanted to talk about. For example, the questionnaire had not really asked about personal stamina, and some students took this opportunity to comment on the tiredness and stress they experienced while juggling many different obligations. Stamina affected part-time students, in particular, because in some cases, the time period of their educational experience was very extended. Not all of the focus was on difficulties, however. Some students recounted highlights of their experience and described their satisfaction with their new knowledge, skills, personal contacts, and increased personal confidence. Although analysis of the questionnaires indicated that the institutional influences on academic decision making are more important to students, the interviews emphasized the significance of the personal dimensions of the student experience.

IMPLICATIONS

It is important for universities to listen to and, whenever possible, to consider and respond to the needs of adult learners. Despite the fact that adult learners constitute a minority group in most universities, they have traditionally contributed much to the educational experience of all. They typically model dedication and positive motivation, and share viewpoints and approaches that represent their often varied life experiences. This study focused primarily on those institutional and personal influences on academic decision making that most affect adult learners. What are their major concerns? What are some of the roadblocks on their path of learning? What, if anything, can universities do to address the issues they raise?

Students in the study elaborated on some of the institutional influences they would like to see changed. Several asked to have more preliminary course information available when making their course selection. In addition to the calendar course descriptions already available on-line, they asked that detailed course outlines also be made available, which would include more specific information on course content, course evaluation, etc. Currently, in our institution, the provision of such outlines is at the

discretion of individual professors, thus, this level of information is available on-line for some courses but not for all. Perhaps universities could mandate that all courses must have detailed, on-line descriptions, which would benefit all students, not just adult learners. Other on-line resources that adult learners would like to see implemented or expanded are on-line tutoring for courses and improved e-mail communication with professors. Again, in some courses supports are already in place, and with the ever-increasing use of technology in course delivery, it is likely that the future will see rapidly expanding use of such on-line services.

Students expressed an underlying sense of frustration about course availability, especially for evening classes and for distance education. Adult learners with full-time jobs often do not have flexibility and have to study at odd hours. Institutions usually do consider the limitations imposed on students by mandatory requirements for academic programs, but it is difficult to ensure that a wide variety of programs can be completed by way of evening or distance courses only. Clearly, institutions need some mechanism in place whereby students can indicate their level of satisfaction with the availability of current courses and academic programs. Once it is known that a demand is not being met, the institution may be able to fill some of the gaps for students who are seeking particular degree programs but are unable to attend on-campus daytime classes.

Many personal influences on academic decision making are beyond the ability of the university to address. However, institutions can and typically do provide counselling services that address a broad array of issues. Orientation sessions, especially, help students to become aware of available services—academic counselling, financial aid counselling, psychological services, learning skills, and career services. For those students with limited or no access to campus, many of these services are inaccessible, although some services are extending evening hours and/or using telephone and e-mail to improve access for adult learners. In addition, student support groups, such as peer-mentoring programs, can be organized so that much of the contact is by telephone. Speaking with a senior student can often answer incoming adult learners' questions and help to calm their fears and uncertainties.

CONCLUSION

Academic decisions of adult learners take into account both institutional and personal factors. This study affirmed that while institutional requirements, out of necessity, drive many of the decisions made, personal circumstances of individual students also play a key role in the eventual academic paths taken. Because of the inter-connectivity of the factors involved, universities have a responsibility to explore avenues of communication with their students to ensure that their academic options are maximized.

A variety of methods was employed in this study to poll students, an important procedure for gaining a balanced impression of their university experiences. The questionnaire included open-ended as well as directed-response questions and was designed with considerable student input. The small group of senior students involved with the research design responded very positively to their involvement and found it to be an important learning experience. It also gave them some ownership of this study. The students who responded to the questionnaires and who engaged in the in-depth interviews spent a considerable amount of time providing their responses, and many expressed satisfaction with their participation. The research process proved to be a learning experience for everyone involved.

In addition to discussing influences on their academic decision making, the students echoed two unifying and positive themes: personal growth and improved self-esteem. One student noted: "I've gotten to meet more people of all ages and backgrounds; they're all very friendly. I think I've grown from meeting these people. I'm not afraid of introducing myself to someone and opening up where I used to be intimidated when I first arrived on campus." Another student spoke of being able to transfer skills to work, by having become a better time manager and writer; another summarized her experience by saying, "I'm more focused and more sure of what I want to do." Others reported improved critical thinking skills, a higher level of personal discipline, and an increased appreciation of world issues and diverse perspectives. The final word, however, goes to the student who felt in her element at the university, as she exclaimed, "I can't imagine not doing this!"

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Biographies

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