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# White Paper

Elearning

&

Adult Students

Elearning Evangelist LLC



As the owner of Elearning Evangelist LLC I have worked as an Instructional Systems Designer in the federal government and as an educator and curriculum developer in the private sector. I have seen the need and have been involved in the quest to improve education and training for the adult learner through online learning commonly known as elearning.

I became immersed in online learning during the internet explosion when I taught abroad. When the delivery of instruction moved to mobile devices I went back to school and graduated as an Instructional Systems Designer. I then concentrated on mastering the theories, tools, and instructional models on how to design, develop, and deliver elearning.

This paper advocates for the needs of the adult student population and demonstrates how utilizing online learning platforms for elearning can help the adult learner population be successful while balancing their employment, family, training, and education.

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# Elearning and Adult Students

Elearning Evangelist LLC

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## Adult Students

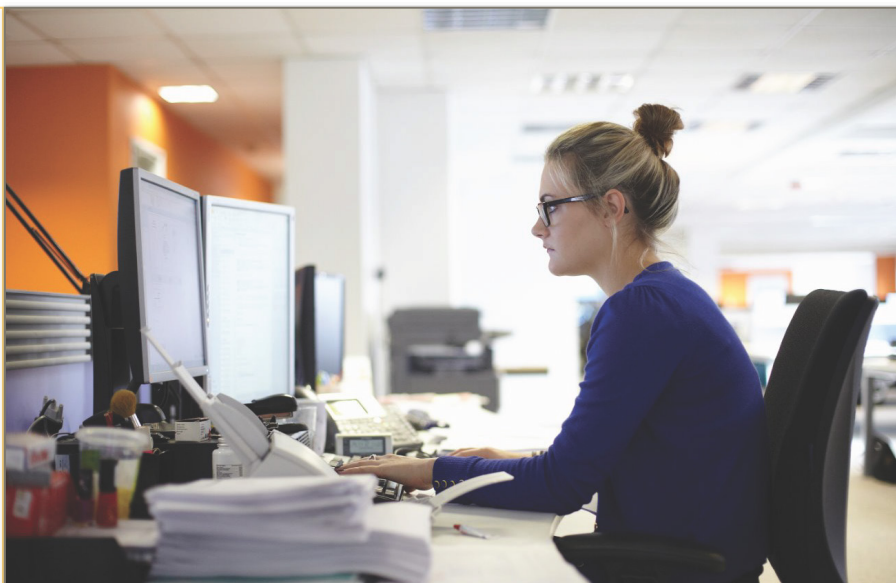
Defining adult students is necessary to understand how common barriers to learning affect the attendance rates of the adult student population. The current number of adult students has increased in a dramatically changed landscape since Knowles first introduced the Adult

Learning Theory (Rabourn et al., 2018). Adult students now make up approximately 60 percent of the undergraduate population in the U.S. (American Council on Education, 2017). However, strategies that increase their attendance persistence rates should be implemented to retain the adult student population. Characteristics of adult students include students that are not dependent

*The current number of adult students has increased in a dramatically changed landscape since Knowles first introduced the Adult Learning Theory.*

*- Source*

Rabourn et al., 2018)



on parents, who are likely to work fulltime and have other obligations and are more likely to be a part-time student (Barrett, 2016; Ferguson & Gordon, 2019). Other characteristics of the adult student population include: (a) finished compulsory education; (b) is over 18 or over 24 depending on the country; (c) is in a nontraditional learning environment; (d) is going to school for either professional or vocational purposes; and (e) is affiliated with the military (Collom et al., 2021; Lee, 2017; Sabo, 2017).

Adult students are also defined as third age learners consisting of baby boomers that no longer have work or home responsibilities at the same level they previously had. These adults were born from 1946-1964 and have entered a stage of active retirement (OED Online, 2016).

Third age learners want to use their talents and experiences to give back to society and explore interests that enhance their lives (Talmage et al., 2015).

## **Barriers to Adult Learning**

Current literature shows there are three common barriers to learning for adult students. These barriers have a negative impact on the adult student retention rate. The barriers are grouped as institutional, situational, and dispositional barriers and has been shown to have a negative impact on the adult student retention rate (Lee, 2017; Osam et al., 2017). The literature has shown that strategies can mitigate barriers and increase the attendance rates of adult students.

### ***Institutional Barriers***

Institutional barriers function as deterrents to entry due to an institutional policy or practice. According to Patterson (2018), institutional deterrent barriers include policies and practices that make it difficult for students to enroll or continue to participate in adult education programs. Examples include lack of information about how to enroll in courses or programs, an inability to attend on a regular basis because of location and transportation problems, inconvenient course times, as well as prohibitive tuition rates. In particular, institutional barriers affect students with childcare responsibilities and affect their persistence rates (Stone & O'Shea, 2022).

Other institutional barriers according to Osam et al. (2017) limit student participation by using admission practices that complicate the admission process, have a lack of financial aid opportunities, and have curriculum services that seem foreign to new or returning adult students which discourages participation. The literature has shown that updating websites to clearly show how the enrollment process works can help to increase student attendance rates.

## ***Situational Barriers***

Situational barriers contribute to conditions that serve to push out students because of insufficient support in reducing the barriers (Jacobson, 2020). Situational barriers that impact program participation include "age, changes in personal and family life, time constraints, economic circumstances, lack of available childcare options, working hours, or the long distance from the location of the educational institution" (Pastogianni & Koutsoukos, 2018, p. 269).

Overall, adult students are challenged by a lack of time which is a major factor that contributes to low attendance rates according to Lee (2017). Given that adult students have multiple responsibilities that they must juggle, the requirement to attend class can overwhelm them and contribute to low attendance rates. The literature has shown that the shift to online environments is preferable for adult students and has increased attendance rates.

## ***Dispositional Barriers***

Dispositional barriers for adult students address how the adult student imagines themselves as a learner. They are internal barriers which are hard to reduce correlating with a view the student has of themselves (Roosmaa & Saara, 2017). They are qualities that the learner possesses that do not allow them to be confident about their learning experiences.

Students can become overly fearful due to perceived deficiencies acquired through prior academic experiences, belief they have been out of the classroom too long, or believe they are too old to learn. Age increases the intensity of dispositional barriers (Roosmaa & Saara, 2017; Spagnola & Yagos, 2020). These attitudes are expressed by a resistance to learning either consciously or unconsciously (Pastogianni and Koutsoukos, 2018). The literature has shown that having access to counselors, staff, professors, classmates or cultivating relationships can reduce



*Yet, in spite of a highly developed U.S. adult education system, "90% of adults aged 20 years and older are considered the least educated and did not participate recently in formal or nonformal education -Source*

(Patterson, 2018, p. 42)



anxiety and build confidence in the adult student leading to increased attendance rates.

## Strategies to Increase Adult Student Attendance Rates

The prevailing trends in adult learning include increased rates of adult participation, increased minority student participation, and the need for a skilled population that can participate in the democratic process. These three trends are interrelated and interact with broader social, technological, and economic developments (Long, 2019). Yet, in spite of a highly developed U.S. adult education system, "90% of adults aged 20 years and older are considered the least educated and did not participate recently in formal or nonformal education" (Patterson, 2018, p. 42).

It is no surprise that national and global interest in adult education has intensified. Adult students represent a greater proportion of the student population. However, institutional, situational, and dispositional barriers act as deterrents to the education of the adult student and has a negative impact on adult student attendance rates (Lee, 2017; Osam et al., 2017). Adult education programs are more likely to serve adults who have the greatest educational and

socioeconomic challenges and who need the most support to include serving adult learners with lower levels of education or unmet literacy, numeracy, and English language needs (Prins & Clymer, 2018).

Providers of adult education, whether in traditional or nontraditional learning environments, can amend current practices and expand services in favor of strategies that can minimize the impact of barriers and lead to increased student attendance rates. For instance, the literature has shown that instituting the following strategies can increase student attendance such as transition programs, reverse transfer credit (RTC) policies, support systems, grants, wraparound support services, stacking credits or credentials, stackable pathways, national funding initiatives, academic library partnerships, and utilizing a myriad of instructional strategies (student engagement, students as partners (SAP), experiential learning), assessment and feedback, and online instruction (blended learning, mobile learning). Successful implementation of these practices has been shown to increase attendance rates.

### *Instructional Strategies*

As noted previously, dispositional barriers are internal and are the most complex because they affect the way adult students views themselves as learners. Therefore, effective instructional strategies are necessary to succeed and persist at the adult stage of life. Utilizing instructional strategies that consider the age, ethnicity, language, gender, biographies, and a host of other demographics that define the learner for the purpose of engaging and empowering the learner has been shown to increase adult student persistence rates (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2018; Gouthro, 2017).



***Instructional support is important for social connectedness, which empowers the students and helps keep them engaged in education***

***-Source***

(Bourke et al, 2020)



Other instructional strategies that the literature has shown increases the adult student attendance rate are classroom empowerment, teaching practices, pedagogy, connecting to students lived experiences, knowing the student by communicating, and creating experimental or collaborative classrooms. Instructional support is important for social connectedness, which empowers the students and helps keep them engaged in education (Bourke et al., 2020).

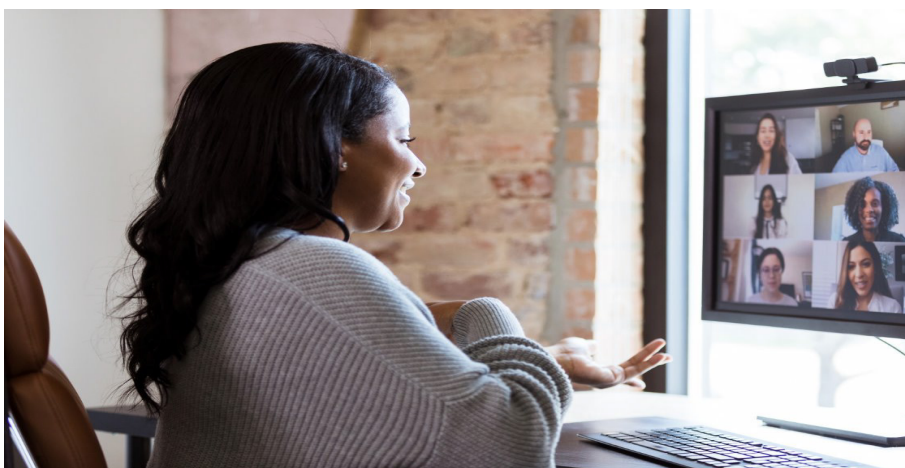
Determining how these strategies contribute to increased attendance rates for adult students is critical in determining how attendance can be improved. For the adult learner, the classroom is deemed to be a site of transformation, not only for the learner but for the instructor. It is where the student can be either bound or loosed in terms of empowerment and mutual discovery (Bourke et al., 2020; Cocquyt et al., 2019; Collom et al., 2021).

Students are loosed from carrying the burden of past educational failures and of negative perceptions by society for their life circumstances. They remain bound if the instructor cannot realize the students as contributors to the educative process and the improvement of society. Bourke et al. (2019) encourages institutions to examine the teaching practices and instructional pedagogy of the instructor to motivate them to employ the lived experiences of the learner.

To encourage ownership of learning and encourage full participation in instructional activities that are designed to help the student meet learning expectations, it is important to

***The literature has shown that adult students prefer the online environment as a flexible mechanism to manage their schedules which contributes to increased student attendance rates.***

***-Source Collom et al., 2021***



have representations of the students' lived experiences contextualized within the lessons (Bourke et al., 2020). For example, self-directed learning is an instructional strategy to enable the learner to take the initiative and responsibility for their own learning in a collaborative process where the teachers function as facilitators of learning, not transmitters (Loeng, 2020).

Acquiring knowledge about students helps to ensure the "appropriate strategy is used for the context which include grade level, subject matter content, community, accountability expectations, and other environmental factors unique to each school and class" (Gordon et al., 2019, p. 201). Adult learners want the instructor to "(a) create a positive communications climate and learning environment, (b) adapt the level of teaching to their experiences and abilities, (c) encourage them, (d) employ active participatory learning techniques, and (e) have emotional intelligence and express empathy" (Rabourn, et al., 2018, p. 31).

Furthermore, the classroom learning environment should be "(a) emotionally safe and sympathetic, (b) the learner should feel encouraged by the instructor and other students, and (c) the learner should have the freedom to ask questions and admit difficulties" (McCall et al., 2018, p. 37).

Part time adult students value their experiences due to instructional strategies such as experimental activities, the deliberate connection of content to their lives, and the collaboration opportunities with colleagues and peers alike (Ferguson & Gordon, 2019). Adult learners show they have an intrinsic interest in learning including learning that is focused on nontraditional educational gains, which apply to vocational or workplace employment, civic engagement, and personal relationships (Rabourn, 2018; Stephens, 2020).

### *Online Instruction*

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic forced educators to turn to online learning as a platform for instruction, method of communicating with students, and delivery of content. The online environment and newer technologies were able to seamlessly extend delivery options to students during this period of time.

The attributes of the online environment are viewed as a positive factor in the lives of the adult student because it provides a level of flexibility for the management of complex schedules and life responsibilities which contributes to increased attendance rates. The literature shows that online discussion forums encourage social interaction and learning and are instrumental in enabling classmate and peer social support in doctoral programs which is a form of social support leading to self-regulation (Covelli, 2017; Williams et al., 2019).

Additionally, Berry's (2017) qualitative study showed that cohorts, classrooms, small study groups, and small friendship groups helped created feelings of membership for online doctoral students. The interactions provided emotional, academic, and social support to the group.

Blended learning and mobile learning are only two types of technological advances that will be discussed and are examples of extending the delivery of instruction to adult learners. The literature has shown that adult students prefer the online environment as a flexible mechanism to manage their schedules which contributes to increased student attendance rates (Rabourn et al., 2018; Stephens, 2020).

### ***Blended Learning***

Adult learners are turning to blended learning as a way to manage their busy lives and complicated schedules while attending class (Cocquyt et al., 2019). The pandemic has increased interest in blended or hybrid learning. Blended learning or hybrid learning is a learning environment where on-site and remote students are enrolled in a single course of study (Raes et al., 2020).

The configuration of the learning environment can take many forms, but in general, blended learning is the combination of in-class and online instruction. Definitions of blended learning range from hybrid, flipped, to inverted learning (Margulieux et al., 2014). Blended learning takes advantage of the flexibility offered to students and the practices and methodologies of andragogy.

The principles of self-directed learning, life-centered orientation, and intrinsic motivation to learn something that is applicable to the lived lives of the adult student experience are facilitated via the blended learning (Cocquyt et al., 2019).

Characteristics of blended learning include "(a) student centered teaching; (b) increased interaction between student-faculty, student-student, content-student, and student-additional learning material; and (c) opportunities to collect formative and summative assessment to improve course offerings" (Watson, n.d.). Instructional support is important for social

connectedness in a blended learning environment for empowering students and helping to keep them engaged in educational pursuits (Bourke et al., 2020).

### *Mobile Learning*

Mobile learning is defined in ways that do not consider pedagogical approaches, which makes the integration and use of mobile devices to support instructional goals and objectives difficult for instructors. Gordon et al. (2019) defines mobile learning as using wireless digital tools to afford individuals learning opportunities at their own pace, place, and path. A range of mobile devices have become more affordable and accessible, such as smart phones, tablets, personal media players, laptops, and cell phones. These devices serve as conduits to the curricula (Gordon, 2019).

The use of mobile devices and mobile applications continues to rise globally even after the COVID-19 pandemic. Having access to instructors using mobile devices has helped to increase feelings of connectedness (Collom et al., 2020; Romero-Rodriquez et al., 2020). The ability of homework to be housed online has provided unfettered access to assignments that can be completed anytime and anywhere allowing even more flexibilities that have not traditionally been available to students.

The use of mobile phones for second language learners is an area of study that shows promise. For example, Mobile-Blended Cooperative Learning (MBCL) has helped to enhance Cambodian EFL students' listening comprehension (Each & Suppasetseree, 2021). Listening is critical in developing language skills.

Mobile learning or mlearning is a wide-ranging concept which, at its simplest, refers to learning and teaching with the help of mobile devices (Ruhalahti, Korhonen, & Rasi, 2017). Mobile phones allow learning to take place any time and anywhere for anyone that has a mobile device. It is mobile devices that are increasing the connectivity to on a global scale.

## **Conclusion**

The rationale for this white paper was to demonstrate the need to stimulate efforts to raise student attendance rates for adults in general education courses and adults in workforce development training. The discussion demonstrates how implementing elearning along with adult instructional strategies has been shown to be an effective means of increasing attendance rates. Increased attendance rates lead to higher levels of academic achievement, increase levels of socio-economic status, create pathways for community inclusion, and provide opportunities for social connectedness and wellbeing by fostering relationships with schools, community and houses of worship.

Additionally, this research can be used to better inform the business community and institutions of higher learning about the needs of their adult student population regarding newer methods of learning. Elearning is an affordable solution to help increase training and educational goals that will be valued by both students and employers, mitigate barriers to learning, and support the potential of adult learner population.



Elearning Evangelist LLC is in a unique position and has the capability to help move your training and instructional needs to a more learner centric model through the use of elearning. Elearning Evangelist LLC uses industry standard elearning authoring tools to deliver engaging and quality content. Skilled in the ADDIE instructional design model we design, develop, and deliver webinars, hybrid learning, online learning, and mobile learning that can be hosted on your LMS or other online platforms as 508 or SCORM compliant content. Where we differentiate our company from others is through our capabilities which include ...

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