Explorations in Adult Higher Education

An Occasional Paper Series

Access, Identity and Power in American Higher Education

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Cover and Inside Art by Raúl Manzano

Raúl Manzano's paintings have been shown in museums, consulates, galleries and community centers in Canada, Spain, Israel and the United States, and have been published in scholarly peer-reviewed journals, magazine covers, catalogs and periodicals. He is an award-winning artist, who most recently received a second prize award at Strive, a national juried art exhibition; and a grant from the Puffin Foundation Ltd. for his project, "In the Eye of the Beholder." Manzano has lectured at leading New York City museums and universities, and served as a juror at exhibition panel committees. His doctoral degree, in interdisciplinary studies with a concentration in museum studies, is from Union Institute and University. He earned a Master of Arts in Liberal Studies with a specialization in Studio Practice and Curatorial Studies at SUNY Empire State College, and a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Illustration and Painting at the School of Visual Arts in New York City.

While most of Raúl Manzano's artistic ideas and exhibitions have been devoted to raising awareness about social issues, nature has been the motto for his new work. As he described: "While I enjoy the pleasure of painting for its own synergy whether depicting a complex ideology, a representational or abstract form, the contours of organic forms and the beauty of nature's colors capture my imagination. The free spirit of sketching or a thoughtfully rendered drawing energize my creativity. I hope that these notions are embedded or suggested in my artworks for the viewer to interpret." Raúl Manzano is a mentor in the visual arts at ESC's Brooklyn and Hudson Street locations. In Barcelona, Spain, he directs the School of Visual Arts' Painting in Barcelona summer program.

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SUNY Empire State College's occasional paper series brings together the ideas, voices and multiple perspectives of those engaged in thinking about adult higher education today. Our goal is to critically examine our theories and practices, to provoke dialogue, and to imagine new possibilities of teaching and learning.

Special thanks to our SUNY Empire State College colleagues whose ideas, work and ongoing commitment to this project have made this publication possible: Dana Brown, Rebecca Eliseo-Arras, David Henahan, John Hughes, Janay Jackson, Janet Jones, Robert Kearns, Seana Logsdon, MaryNell Morgan, Dan Nyaronga, Anastasia Pratt, Amy Ruth Tobol, Lucy Winner, the Print Shop, and the Office of Academic Affairs. With much appreciation.

The recordings of the webinars in this series, upon which this publication is based, are available upon request by emailing Karen.LaBarge@esc.edu.

The ideas expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect those of SUNY Empire State College.

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The Crossroads of Change: Why Adult Learners Are So Important to the Future of Higher Education (and Vice Versa)

David Scobey

Key Themes and Ideas

I want to give thanks to my colleagues at SUNY Empire State College for inviting me to be a part of this project. I am going to make an argument that brings together two different stories. The first is an overview of the emergence of adult nontraditional students as the new majority of American college students. For some readers, the data I will offer may be old news, but I have found that even educators who work every day with adult students do not necessarily have a sense of the larger demographic reality.

Secondly, speaking as a historian, I want to describe the historical context behind the rise of this new majority. I want to link the growth in adult learners to larger changes in higher education over the past 30 years. This has been a period of both turmoil and creativity, one that has made large changes in higher education inevitable. Yet the specific kind of change is still up for grabs; there are both positive and negative ways forward. We are at a crossroads where higher educators and our students need to decide together what kind of change and what kind of innovation we want.

I am going to argue that adult learners have a crucial role in both this recent history and the crossroads of change in which we find ourselves. The rise of the new adult majority is one of the key results of the era of turmoil we have lived through. And at the same time, it offers an important opportunity for positive innovation.

The New Majority: Factors and Numbers

So, first of all, a little bit of "Adult Learner 101."

In contrast to the common understanding of the public and even most academics, adult, nontraditional students have constituted the large majority of American undergraduates for at least the past 20 years. If you ask what proportion of college-goers are just out of high school, attending full time in a two- or four-year institution, and financially dependent on their parental household – that is, their parents had to sign the FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid) form – the answer is surprising: only one out of four.1 And that is just the same proportion of the number of undergraduates who are parents. We know that about 35% of college students work full time and that almost half attend school part time. In other words, our conventional picture of the normative undergraduate is true for only a minority of college-goers.

I want to be clear about how we ought to define and measure "nontraditional-ness" among college students. Much of the current public policy conversation simply – and inaccurately – equates "nontraditional students" with "older students" – typically those who are age 25 or older. Yet the National Center for Educational Statistics (2015) does not even use age as a factor in deciding if a student is traditional or nontraditional. It turns out that there are as many nontraditional students – that is, students who do not fit into the portrait I was describing earlier – *under* the age of 25 as there are over it. The 22-year-old barista is just as much of an adult nontraditional student as a 35-year-old Iraq War veteran. Instead of treating age as a proxy, this federal agency uses seven different criteria for deciding if students are nontraditional:

1. "Being independent for financial aid purposes.
2. Having one or more dependents.
3. Being a single caregiver.
4. Not having a traditional high school diploma.
5. Delaying postsecondary enrollment.
6. Attending school part time.
7. Being employed full time" (Notes section, para. 1).

This understanding of nontraditional college students is nuanced and complex. Yet I would argue that one key question underlies its multiple factors: Can a student organize her life, including even her work-life, around a central role as a full-time student? For the majority of undergraduates, the answer is no.

The New Majority: How They Differ; What They Share

This new majority is incredibly diverse in age and role. It includes veterans and formerly incarcerated citizens and full-time parents, 20-something construction workers and 30-something office workers. Across these categories, students of color tend to be more highly represented than white students, but there are significant numbers of nontraditional students across all ethno-racial and gender categories. Yet even though they are very diverse and very different, I want to stress three commonalties that these students share.

The first is the social complexity of these students' lives in terms of the roles and stressors that they have to balance: parenting, work, often community responsibilities, along with going to school. One result is, of course, enormous time pressure. As a student in a research focus group put it:

> *I go to work at 5 o'clock. I work through lunch … [I] come down here [to campus] several nights a week, but I do try to take some online courses so that I can stay home once in a while, but [some nights] from 4 o'clock in the morning until 10 o'clock at night I'm not home.* (Rowan-Kenyon, Swan, Deutsch, & Gansneder, 2010, p. 106)

The second commonality is the emotional complexity of being a nontraditional student. Literally, every student I have ever taught, interviewed, or spoken with expresses some kind of shame or embarrassment, the sense of being set back or emotionally burdened by not having followed the normative script of high school-to-college. And conversely they often stress the emotional power of returning to school and advancing toward their degree. An adult undergraduate from The Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington, whom I interviewed, underscored both sides of this emotional drama:

> *I always felt less-than. I feel like an imposter. Coming here has helped me find my voice. It helps me move through the world. And it's important that I can share this program with others like me.* (Scobey, 2016, p. 110)

Both the emotional burdens of being nontraditional and the emotional power of succeeding in the face of those burdens are powerful factors in understanding the lives and the goals of nontraditional students.

The final commonality is the frustration of confronting an academy largely – not always, but largely – designed for someone else: for traditional students, and thus, the frustration of having to swim upstream, so to speak, to get your education. As educators who work in adult-serving programs or with adult

students know, these barriers span everything from inconvenient office hours and availability of student services, to the schedule of classes, to the ways that even committed teachers often misunderstand the lives of the nontraditional students.

All of these commonalities – the social complexity of new-majority lives, the emotional complexities that result, an academy too often clueless about these students – lead to very high levels of stopping-out. Traditional college-goers graduate at two to three times the rate of those with multiple nontraditional factors. And the more of those factors a student has, the less likely, statistically, she or he will complete on time. As a result, there are some 35 to 40 million Americans – one in five working adults – with some college and no degree, most of them carrying loan debt without the benefits of having graduated.

The New Majority: Conceptions and Misconceptions

For many years and in many institutions, this new majority was largely ignored and invisible. There were important exceptions, such as SUNY Empire State College, which has been a wonderfully adult-serving institution since the 1970s. But for the most part, adult students have until very recently been marginalized in the mainstream academy.

Happily, higher education is beginning to pay attention to new-majority students. But now they often suffer from a second form of invisibility, one that is equally important to the story I want to tell about the crossroads of change. For even as the new majority is gaining more and more scrutiny from policymakers and educational leaders, they too often assume that adult learners have straightforwardly instrumental goals: to get a credential to improve their job prospects, to get a promotion or to get a new job. As one national report put it:

> Adult learners … use a simple calculus. They ask: How can I maximize the economic value of my time in school while minimizing the amount of time I have to spend in classes? They are looking for flexibility, convenience, and accelerated progress to skills and credentials that pay off, as well as better odds for completion. (Kazis et al., 2007, p. 15)

Such a viewpoint presents adult learners as little more than job, time and credential calculators. Yet if you ask adults themselves, you get a sense of their complex needs and mixed motives. These, of course, include job and economic

goals and pressures, but such factors are often inseparable from family goals, emotional needs, community service and intellectual exploration. This interview with an adult student at The Evergreen State College captured such complexity well:

> *I came back to college because I felt like an angry underling. I had a good job, but didn't get respect at work. I felt slapped, like I didn't amount to anything without that piece of paper. So I returned to school because of my career goals. But my parents are gone, and I also came back for them.* (Scobey, 2016, pp. 109-110)

In my experience as a teacher and researcher, such comments are characteristic: for adult learners, issues of work and children and parents and self-identity blend seamlessly together.

My final point is connected to this understanding of the scale and complexity of new-majority aspirations. The assumption that adult learners are simply economic calculators is often linked with the assumption that all they typically seek is short-term job training. That is certainly true for many returning adults. But we know that four out of five incoming community college students aspire to the bachelor's degree and beyond. Indeed, if you ask that same question of incoming community college students who are over the age of 35, 60% of them say they want to earn their bachelor's or beyond. What they seek is generally more than accelerated training, and they generally link their economic goals to larger personal, family and social aspirations.

Contexts (I): Democratization and Crisis

So that is the end of "Adult Learner 101." Now I want to step back and focus on the history of these past 30 years in higher education, about the context in which this new nontraditional majority grew. The growth of adult learners is the result of a complex of different forces during that period.

First, there was a huge expansion of college-going, beginning with the GI Bill of Rights after World War II, the postwar expansion of public university and community college systems, and the embattled victories of affirmative action. This expansion was intensified by the relative decline of high-paying industrial, often unionized work, and also by the entry of women into college and the labor force in greater numbers.

At the same time that these forces increased college-going, the Reagan Revolution in the 1980s brought a stagnation of public investment in higher education. The story is different in different states and at different times; but in general, per-student funding of higher education declined, and that decline outsourced the payment for this expansion of higher education onto student debt and rising tuition.

And that has meant that the last three decades have been a time of fiscal crisis. We all know the news of fiscal stress, of burdensome student debt levels, and of growth in student wage work. All of us who are in higher education know that adjunctification of the teaching faculty has been an important effect of such budgetary stress. Especially in the regional public university and from the community colleges, where the vast majority of those working-class and nontraditional students go, the past 30 years have brought endemic fiscal stress.

I want to tie these fiscal pressures to two other crises. One is what I would call the decomposition of learning communities. Part-time faculty now offer on average more than half of the credits that students take when they graduate. More than two out of five undergraduates are enrolled part time. And most students earn credits from more than one institution on their way to their degree. These patterns of credit shopping and what is called "swirling" in attendance make it harder to build the kind of ongoing, sustained learning communities that are important for the success and learning of all students. They are especially corrosive for underserved students for whom college may seem an unwelcome environment. The result has been the languishing completion rates I have already discussed.

And all these stressors and disruptions feed the last crisis that I want to discuss: the legitimation crisis in higher education, the sense that we are not delivering on the promise that we owe the larger society for the resources and the autonomy we receive. Over the last 30 years, this crisis of legitimacy has taken many forms: battles over culture wars, over political correctness, over multiculturalism, and more recently over the "value proposition" of college-going itself.

Contexts (II): Not Just Crisis but Creativity: "High-Impact Practices"

But alongside the turmoil and crisis, the declining indicators and sense of broken promises, these past 30 years have also brought remarkable (and unremarked) creativity in higher education. We have seen the emergence of many new interdisciplinary fields, including ethnic studies, gender studies, neuropsychology, and community health. Equally importantly has been the growth of what George Kuh (2008) has called "High-Impact Practices" (HIPs). Kuh, through the National Survey of Student Engagement, came to the conclusion after interviewing hundreds of thousands of students that there was a cluster of practices that students reported as especially consequential to them. These include first-year seminars, learning communities, undergraduate research programs, study abroad, civic engagement and service learning experiences, internships, and capstone projects, among others.

HIPs are often presented, as I have just done, as a laundry list of good stuff that works. But I would argue that they constitute a more unified set of innovations, an emergent model of the undergraduate experience, an alternative to the old paradigm of "gen ed-to-major." In this model, we glimpse a different logic of the undergraduate experience. HIPs work across and against the disciplines. They tend to combine liberal, experiential and sometimes pre-professional learning. Some of the practices foreground collaboration, and others, self-authoring and individual self-transformation. Most break out of the spatial logic of the classroom and even the campus, and break out of the temporal logic of the credit hour and the semester. They are pieces of a jigsaw puzzle that suggests a holistic, integrative, engaged model of learning, a design for educating the whole student.

It is striking that nearly all of these innovative practices were developed and disseminated in the 1980s and '90s – precisely the same period as the crises I sketched earlier. They emerged from the fissures and fractures of change, driven by networks of faculty, staff and often students who were living through the tumultuous breakdown of the older undergraduate paradigm. Creativity emerged from crisis.

Contexts (III): A Second Wave of Change

But innovation did not stop with these new fields and new high-impact practices. Over the past 10 years, there has been yet another wave of change-making. This second wave is again a response to the crises, the turmoil, the stressors that I have been describing. But it reflects different priorities and values; its innovations are more institutional and technological than pedagogical and curricular. And it has been driven more by external stakeholders – policymakers, funders and entrepreneurs – than by the faculty and staff activists who led the movements for high-impact learning. I want to stress three interventions of this second wave of change.

The first is, of course, the digital turn. Here, for instance, is Tom Friedman's (2013) premature celebration of the way that MOOCs (massive open online courses) were going to revolutionize universities, but we can take it as standing for the larger growth of online courses and online degrees.

> I can see a day soon where you'll create your own college degree by taking the best online courses from the best professors from around the world ... paying only the nominal fee for the certificates of completion. It will change teaching, learning and the pathway to employment. (para. 10)

Friedman and his fellow technophiles were onto something important. Currently, about one-third of undergraduates take at least one online course, and about one out of seven undergraduates study fully online. This is not a revolution, but it is a truly important innovation. And beyond online courses, there are a host of other digital capacities that I think higher education has only begun to explore: the capacity to incorporate multimedia work, for instance, or the capacity to use online, digital platforms for new forms of collaborative learning.

Another of these important, "second-wave" interventions is the completion agenda – the widespread view that languishing graduation rates and burgeoning stop-out rates require a concerted effort to boost academic completion. Here is the Lumina Foundation (2019):

> The nation faces an urgent and growing need for talent. To meet that need, many more people must earn college degrees, workforce certificates, industry certifications and other high-quality credentials. That's why Lumina Foundation works to ensure that, by 2025, 60 percent of Americans hold a

> credential beyond high school – a quality credential that prepares people for informed citizenship and economic success. (Tracking America's Progress section, para. 1)

Lumina has in fact been the most important driver of this effort. Its "Goal 2025" – having 60% of Americans hold postsecondary credentials by 2025 – focuses especially on the imperative to supply the American economy with the kind of skilled and talented workforce it is thought to require.

That focus of what I would call "instrumental vocationalism" – the overriding need to align higher education with training for the labor market – is the third of these key "second-wave" changes. Here, for instance, is Florida's former Governor (and current U.S. Senator) Rick Scott:

> You know, we don't need a lot more anthropologists in the state. It's a great degree if people want to get it, but we don't need them here. I want to spend our dollars giving people science, technology, engineering, math degrees. That's what our kids need to focus all their time and attention on. Those type of degrees. So when they get out of school, they can get a job. (as cited in Weinstein, 2011, para. 2)

As I have noted, students worry about jobs, and the mission of education for work has always been central to undergraduate learning in the U.S. But the last 10 years have seen a particularly instrumental version of concern: education for the job has tended to crowd out all other educational purposes, and education for the job is increasingly defined as short-term workforce training rather than preparation and discernment of meaningful work. This has meant a rewriting of the social compact for colleges.

What Kind of Innovation Do We Want?

In contrast to the high-impact practices, these more recent interventions – the completion agenda, the rise of digital learning, and the dominance of vocationalism – seem to me more contradictory and equivocal in their consequences for higher education. The completion agenda, for instance, has brought a much-needed focus not simply on access for underserved students, but on their academic success. Yet it has also intensified a kind of credentialism, as if a certain level of degrees and credentials were the goal, rather than the benchmark of educational excellence.

The case is similar with digital learning. It offers enormous opportunities for overcoming distance and reducing the time-pressures in students' lives. It can undo many of the hierarchies of gender, race, disability and temperament that can be present in face-to-face classrooms. Yet it also risks intensifying the isolationism of college learning, and it often reintroduces the sort of skill-transfer and knowledge-handout teaching that earlier innovations – the high-impact practices – did so much to transcend.

And finally with a turn to vocationalism. This has brought a truly important and useful call to the liberal arts academy to integrate work into our educational purposes. And yet it too often falls into a short-term and instrumental vision of workforce training. Again, there are equivocal consequences.

The lesson of the past 30 years – an era of multiple crises and multiple waves of innovation – is that higher education is on the cusp of dramatic change. There is no option of digging in, defending the past, keeping things as they were. It is not a choice between staying put and changing. It is a choice between different kinds of futures; between different ways of taking up these forces of innovation, each with its positive and negative implications. We are at a crossroads of change.

And adult learners are right at that crossroads.

Adult Learners at the Crossroads of Change

The very fact that we have a new majority of nontraditional adults is a result of the historical forces I have sketched here: the simultaneous expansion and disruption of college-going, the growing need for and barriers to a college education. And the "second-wave" interventions I have described are focused to a great extent on adult learners. Adults are seen as key to the completion agenda. Online learning is seen as especially benefiting the complexity of adult lives, and adults are often the primary target for online marketing by for-profit and not-for-profit institutions. Adults are seen as exemplifying why short-term, instrumental vocationalism is needed.

You will not be surprised to hear that these appeals to adult learners, this push to drive them toward short-term, accelerated, online job training, represents the most thinned-out version of educational innovation – and an inaccurate understanding of adult learners. It forgets precisely that rich complexity of needs and goals of what I have described to you.

New-majority students *do* need degrees and job advancement. They *do* benefit from digital learning. But unless these are coupled with attention to the whole adult student, to what I would call the "vision of the high-impact practices," these change strategies work to instrumentalize nontraditional students and to reinforce the least positive versions of innovations.

I would argue that adults need education that addresses all of their needs; that brings together liberal learning, vocational learning and experiential learning; that helps them break out of the limits of the campus and the weekly class, which often do not fit their own lives. They need opportunities for collaboration, peer learning and individual self-authoring. They need learning communities that include supportive teachers, mentors and peers, and such communities tend to happen more in face-to-face or hybrid programs.

The exemplary programs that I know of offer that kind of high-impact education for the whole adult student. And not surprisingly, such programs nearly always produce higher completion rates than mass online alternatives. There are many examples, but I would point you to a group of adult serving college programs called the Great Colleges for the New Majority. You can go to our website and read our manifesto (https://www.collegeunbound.org/apps/pages/greatcolleges). It is a group of about a dozen programs that for me represents a beachhead for the sort of learning that meets adults in their lives and offers them the kind of rich, engaged learning that is good for them. In the process, I believe that it points the way forward at this crossroads of change toward the best kind of innovative future.

Note

[1] For more information on the various statistics provided throughout this paper, please see Scobey (2016).

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