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Futuring for Optimum Outcomes in Higher Education: Addressing the Needs of Today's Adult Learners

Dr. Lisa L. Rollins, Ph.D., Ed.S.

Abstract

If educational institutions are to be prepared to meet the future's challenges, including the unique needs of adult learners in today's college classrooms, their leaders must plan today to make needed changes. Per the World Future Society, "Proactive, future-oriented thinking can lead to greater success in both work and private affairs. The future will happen, no matter what we do, but if we want it to be a *good* future, we need to work at it" (2002, available at <http://www.wfs.org>). Change is inevitable, yet many organizational leaders fail to effectively map out successful transitions. Strategic quality planning, however, provides those who utilize its tools (e.g., environmental scanning, trend extrapolation, Delphi Technique, scenario planning, etc.) with a systematic framework that can help move an organization move from its present state to where its planners want it to be (Alexander & Serfass, 1999). Through a review of relevant literature, this article will explore some of these futuring tools and their appropriate application, with an emphasis on current trends in higher education, and in particular, as it relates to adult learners.

Key words

Adult learners, high education, futuring tools, trends in high education

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Technology and its widespread utilization have brought about not only new mechanical devices, but also new systems of social practices and implications (Rakow, 1992). Such technological advances inspire societal change; thus, those within business and science have demonstrated their ability to employ strategic quality planning to meet the challenges of emerging trends that impact their organizations. However, those within educational settings also must be prepared to respond to the ever-evolving changes that they confront. Related to this, Alexander and Serfass (1999) have observed the following:

Over the past few decades, our society has changed rapidly and dramatically. Planning for the future, while never easy, has become a formidable task for educational organizations. What was once expected to occur five to 10 years in the future happens more immediately and abruptly. Whether dealing with changes in educational practice, increasing opportunities for technological applications, the societal implications of multiculturalism, funding issues, or the wars on poverty, drugs, illiteracy and crime, educational leaders must now plan in a way that was not required of them in the past. (p. vii)

While it is undoubtedly challenging to proactively and realistically plan for the uncertain changes ahead, humans possess the ability to not only think constructively about the future, but also to "anticipate many future events, envision desirable goals, and develop effective strategies for realizing our purposes" (World Future Society, 2002, available at <http://www.wfs.org>).

With regard to education, it has been reported that its "destiny is at stake and attention must be turned to long-range strategic planning with a clear direction for the future" (Alexander & Serfass, 1999, p. vii). Effective strategic planning, however, demands "a higher level of scientific planning" than ever before (Alexander & Serfass, 1999, p. vii). Thus, while it is still imperative for educational leaders to establish their institutional missions and visions, as well as goals and values (Alexander & Serfass, 1999), planners also must be prepared to pose fundamental questions and actively examine trends to meet the organizational challenges that are foreseeable, yet still unknown. Thus, to remain competitive and maintain success, it is imperative that institutional planners "be informed and enlightened enough to ask fundamental questions that could well influence their institution's future viability" (Beaudoin, 2003, available at <http://www.westga.edu/%7Edistance/ojdl/summer62/beaudoin62.html>).

Emerging Issues and Trends in Higher Education

One of the more recent trends in higher education involves the widespread reduction in remedial courses, also known as developmental education or developmental studies, being offered to students at the undergraduate level. Many colleges and universities have made spending cuts in this area in an attempt to shave budgets. However, there clearly exists a need for such remediation. For example, in fall 2002, 59% of incoming freshmen at Cal State—about 22,370 students—needed remedial math or English (Arnone, 2004), while 21% of all instruction in the City University of New York's (CUNY) six community colleges occurred in remedial classrooms (Wright, 1998). "And on top of that, 87% of incoming freshmen [at CUNY] fail at least one of three basic skills exams (Wright, 1998, p. 12).

Even high-schoolers who appear to be relatively prepared for academe are proving to be among those in need of developmental courses in college. For example, according to fall 2001 statistics from the University of Nevada at Las Vegas, 38% of the freshmen who enrolled in remedial English and 21% of those who enrolled in remedial mathematics had high-school grade-point averages (GPA) between 2.75 and 2.9 (Selingo, 2002). Further, in looking at the need for remedial courses at the collegiate level nationwide, "Because many high schools don't do their jobs, 53% of college students, including those who attend community colleges, require remedial courses" (Gregorian, 2004, p. B12).

Not unrelated to the developmental education issue is the current trend of raising admission standards within higher education. Regarding this link, Brand (1997) observed the following:

Some colleges and universities provide open admissions, which reduces the pressure for performance standards at high schools. The result, excessive need for remediation at the university level, which is a very expensive way to teach the basics. Necessarily, there will continue to be a place for remediation at the university level, since some of our students have returned to school after many years and students come from underprivileged educational environments, but the need for remediation should be minimized to the extent possible. (p. 403)

Still, "with colleges seeking to enhance their quality and lawmakers reluctant to pay for expensive remedial courses, pressure is mounting in more states to set across-the-board [admissions] standards" (Selingo, 2002, p. A-22). Some states, in fact, concerned about "the poor preparation and weak academic records of many public-college students," have opted to stiffen admissions standards in the coming decade. (Selingo, 2002, p. A22) Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU), which is Tennessee's largest undergraduate university, is among those colleges and universities whose administrators have raised the admission requirements for incoming freshmen. Specifically, beginning in fall 2004, entering freshmen who wanted to ensure admission to any of MTSU's undergraduate programs of study were required to have a 3.0 GPA or composite 22 on the ACT (*The Record*, March 22, 2004, p. 2). Prior to MTSU's stiffening of admissions standards, potential undergraduates were required to have a 2.8 GPA or a composite ACT score of 20.

Referring to the jump in required academic standards, Dr. Robert Glenn, then MTSU's vice president for student affairs and vice provost for enrollment management, has said, "We are coming to the end of finite resources, and at the same time, an increasing demand for our services. We are not in a position to admit all students who want to come here, and so we have to apply some kind of criteria to reduce the number of students who are admitted" (*The Record*, March 22, 2004, p. 2). By raising admission standards, some suggest, not only will two-year institutions become more accessible, but also "it will become more feasible to allow four-year institutions to carry out a more traditional four-year mission" (Selingo, 2002, p. A22).

Another recent trend within higher education is the reduction of hours required to graduate from many baccalaureate programs. The Tennessee Board of Regents (TBR), which is the governing board for MTSU, approved a 12-hour cut in the number of semester hours required to earn a bachelor's degree from TBR schools; thus, causing most baccalaureate programs to go from 132 hours to 120 hours (Tennessee Tech University, July 2003, available at <http://www.tntech.edu/publicaffairs/rel/120hours.html>). According to Dr. Diane Miller, former interim vice provost for the Division of Academic Affairs at MTSU, "The focus of

the reduction plan is to benefit students, educationally and financially. The plan supports MTSU's Academic Master Plan of creating a more student-centered learning environment" (*The Record*, Oct. 13, 2003, p. 2).

Moreover, as observed by Arnone (2004), booming college enrollments, tight state budgets, and a lack of space on campuses have caused public institutions to seek ways to move students through their degree programs more quickly. "Policies to hasten students through college are not new, but they are receiving renewed interest these days because many states have record deficits and, as a result, have cut spending on colleges," reports Arnone (2004, p. A20). As evidence, California's Board of Trustees, among others, adopted a plan to not only increase its graduation rates, but also enable students to graduate with fewer credits (Arnone, 2004).

One of higher education's most prevailing trends is an ever-increasing number of adult learners and nontraditional¹ students. From the community college to the research university, adult students are returning to all sectors of academe in never-before-seen numbers (Nelson, 1996). In fact, according to one estimate from The College Board, 45% of today's college population is 25-plus and only 20% of students attend full time and are under 22 (Culross, 1996). Since the late 1970s, in fact, post-secondary institutions have experienced a juggernaut of such learners, making adults "the fastest growing segment of all the population groups in higher education" (Brazziel, 1990, p. 116). As evidence, Elson (1992) has reported that more than one-third of those enrolled in U.S. colleges and universities are nontraditional students who are age 35 and older. Similarly, the U.S. Department of Education reported that 90 million adult Americans returned to the classroom in 1999 alone, meaning 46% of the nation's entire population (Greenberg, 2000); thus, signifying a clear shift in what was once considered the traditional student² demographic within higher education in the U.S.

While adult students come to the college classroom for the same reasons that traditional students do, they bring along "more complex issues that may dramatically affect their ability to stay in school" (Osgood-Treston, 2001, p. 121). In turn, an ever-present issue related to the still-increasing number of adult students in college and university classrooms is the failure of those within academe to recognize the unique needs of these learners. Tiff (1988) reports that with fewer students in the 18-24 age group on campus, officials in higher education "have actively begun to court members of the over-25 set" in an effort to "fill half-empty lecture halls—and depleted coffers" (p. 90).

Unfortunately, though, those same university and college administrators who have actively worked to recruit students in the 25-plus age demographic still lack "a recognition that many students attending college today are not 'young people.' They are adults seeking a college degree for the first time, returning to school after an absence to raise children or support a family, or taking courses in an attempt to retool after a job displacement" (Culross, 1996, p. 50).

In spite of the fact that educational opportunities available to nontraditional students have never been greater, the availability of academic services for such learners hasn't similarly risen (DiSilvestro, 1981), for even in the college classroom there is evidence that "all traditionally taught courses are unintentionally but nevertheless deeply biased in ways that make substantial differences in performance for many students," including adult learners (Nelson, 1996, p. 165).

Helping Adult and Nontraditional Learners Make Classroom Connections

Those within higher education should be aware that many college students, including nontraditional and adult learners, fail to make connections between what is

being presented in the classroom with that which occurs in their own lives and relates to their future goals. Although the traditional college student is usually described as being between 18-23, it is suggested herein that teaching faculty in higher education actively work to help students make such connections, including through the incorporation of adult learning principles. For example, according to "Principles of Adult Learning," an online article, "Adults are relevancy-oriented. They must see a reason for learning something. Learning has to be applicable to their work or other responsibilities to be of value to them. Therefore, instructors must identify objectives for adult participants before the course begins ... [and] theories and concepts must be related to a setting familiar to participants." (Principles of Adult Learning, 1991, available at <http://honolulu.hawaii.edu/intrane/committees/FacDevComguidebk/teachtip/adults-2.htm>)

There is real value in devising a classroom approach that allows students, no matter their age, to choose projects that meet their individual interests and needs. Although this relevancy-oriented principle is described as specifically suiting adult learners, this approach also is applicable to other students as well. For example, learners in various settings may not make needed "connections" unless a professor presents comparisons that help them see a correlation between, say, education and business; thus, students gain a newfound understanding and sense of relevancy about chamber of commerce meetings. After being able to make the needed connections, learners will not only be able to progress in his thinking on the subject of improving education, but also in a position to embark upon real learning.

Also, if instructors present learning scenarios that require students to apply the lessons imparted, then the successful application or modeling by students of what was taught can be illustrated to some degree. Standardized tests, though, are not an apt indicator of a given student's intelligence, as noted by Rayburn, who writes that:

Some kids are much better at taking standardized tests than other kids. Unfortunately, the children who perform poorly on multiple-choice standardized tests (but perhaps might perform well on an open-ended form of test) are labeled as 'less intelligent,' and the school suffers. Also, there is the ridiculous practice of testing second-language kids in English, so they do horribly and then funding can be cut from schools. (2003, p. 267)

A study on standardized testing by the National Research Council, which conducted its research per a directive from the members of Congress, focused on the use of standardized tests scores for "so-called high-stakes purposes, defined as making decisions about tracking, promotion, and graduation" (Rayburn, 2003, p. 267).

According to Rayburn (2003), "The committee found that while 'testing can yield valuable information about a student's achievement, the nature and limitations of that information are widely misunderstood ...[and] test results are often used improperly'" (p. 266). Moreover, the study's researchers also concluded that one "fundamental truth about [standardized] tests that is well known by experts but generally obscured in public policy debates and news reports [is that] test scores are subject to all kinds of statistical and human error and are therefore very often wrong" (Rayburn, 2003, p. 267). Those who conducted the study also went on record in regard to standardized testing by suggesting the following:

There is a remarkable lack of agreement in many cases about whether a particular test even measures what it is supposed to measure. But because educational test results are given in numerical form they create a powerful impression of scientific precision ... they are not. They provide only one perspective—and often

a narrow and clouded one—on a student's actual knowledge. This appearance of precision in test score has been used in many instances to rationalize discriminatory and unfair practices. (Rayburn, 2003, p. 267)

Further, when it comes to standardized tests, "Teachers know that standardized tests are not perfect measures of what their students have learned, just as they know that the assessments they develop for their own use are not perfect measures," posits McKenna. "Yet they still use them to diagnose, motivate, and focus classroom learning" (2002, p. 23). Thus, it is likely that such tests will be utilized in spite of, for example, the findings of the National Research Council's recent study, which points out the numerous imperfections of such tests. Yet why do so many rely on these flawed tests? Largely, report researchers, because such instruments are viewed as "an effective tool for whipping the public schools into shape" (Rayburn, 2003, p. 266) and because "measuring changes behavior" (McKenna, 2002, p. 23). Still, it is unlikely that tests, standardized or otherwise, serve as a source of learning motivation for most students.

One of the more provocative ideas presented in the "Motivated to Learn" vignette concerned education's relation to social change. This idea placed its emphasis on whether outcomes in education are reliant upon social change and reform, or can improvements within education serve as an impetus for change in and of themselves? For those who believe that change can be achieved incrementally, including one small bit—and even one student—at a time, it stands to reason that if the quality of classroom instruction is improved, the quality of learning for students is likely to improve as well, with or without needed funding.

Thusly, if educators are to inspire others toward successful learning, they cannot forget the importance of motivation. Unfortunately, however, all too often, "Learning often becomes associated with drudgery instead of delight. A large number of students—more than one in four—leave school before graduating. Many more are physically present in the classroom but largely mentally absent; they fail to invest themselves fully in the experience of learning" (Student Motivation to Learn, n.d., available at http://www.kidsource.com/kidsource/content2/Student_Motivation.html).

While many things shape what motivates one to learn, most instructors or faculty have access to their students only in a school setting, be it in the online or on-ground classroom. It is within this environment, then, that it is up to teachers to see themselves as being "active socialization agents capable of stimulating ... student motivation to learn" (Brophy, 1986). The classroom setting, in turn, must be one that is seen by students as being a caring and supportive environment where "there is a true sense of belonging and everyone is valued and respected;" thus, all in attendance "will tend to participate more fully in the process of learning" (Student Motivation to Learn, n.d., available at http://www.kidsource.com/kidsource/content2/Student_Motivation.html).

Regarding unmotivated students and learners who are discouraged, Brophy (1986) has suggested that attribution retraining be utilized. He describes this as a process that encompasses modeling, socialization, and practice exercises. It is through this process, he explains, that students can be encouraged and inspired to focus on the tasks at hand instead of being preoccupied with the fear of failing. Project-based learning is yet another method that enables teachers to promote motivation in the classroom by engaging students in the creation of project assignments or goal-setting of their own. Doing so provides students with "a sense of ownership and control over their own learning" and said learners are given an additional chance "to identify related sub-topics and explore them in a project-based scenario" (Building Motivation, n.d., available at <http://www.4teachers.org/projectbased/more.shtml>).

Moreover, the utilization of the project-based approach in one's teaching allows students to not only feel ownership in the construction of their learning, but also provides them with valuable opportunities for cooperative learning, communication, collaboration, and peer mentoring. Such an approach encourages exploration of various interests and challenges students; thus, motivating them toward more complex projects related to their learning (Building Motivation, n.d., available at <http://www.4teachers.org/projectbased/more.shtml>).

Thus, while the educational system is perpetually in need of adequate funding, some things—including a teacher's approach toward the motivation of learning among his or her students—may be implemented today, not years, months, or weeks from now. It is by involving students in the construction of their own knowledge base, and especially by giving them a voice in the classroom, that learners will begin to build intrinsic motivation toward problem-solving that will help prepare them for the professional world (Building Motivation, n.d., available at <http://www.4teachers.org/projectbased/more.shtml>).

The Delphi Technique

Organizational planners, in seeking to identify and forecast emerging trends within a given environment, look to a number of strategy-building tools, including the Delphi Technique, to help guide their organizational decisions and planning efforts. Frequently referred to as the "Jury of Executive Opinion" method, the Delphi "is a well-used futuring tool that is useful in getting issues focused by surveying experts in a field rather than the general population" (Alexander & Serfass, 1999, p. 59). Similarly, Kurtzman (1984) has described the Delphi, which was designed to seek out a consensus of expert opinion about the issue at hand, as a highly structured method that polls experts on their considered opinions about a specific aspect of the future.

Because the Delphi "provides a reasonably clear picture of where the organization is headed and what might be done about it, particularly in the near future (Alexander & Serfass, 1999, p. 59), it is especially useful in scenario planning, including within the area of higher education and student enrollment. Notably, the number of adult learners returning to college classrooms, both on-ground and online, is higher than ever, for example. There is, then, "a recognition that many students attending college today are not 'young people.' They are adults seeking a college degree for the first time, returning to school after an absence to raise children or support a family, or taking courses in an attempt to retool after a job displacement" (Culross, 1996, p. 50).

Armed with complex issues that impact their ability to stay in school, adult learners are descending upon university and college campuses in unprecedented numbers (Osgood-Treston, 2001). Since the late 1970s, in fact, post-secondary institutions have experienced a juggernaut of such learners, making adults "the fastest growing segment of all the population groups in higher education" (Brazziel, 1990, p. 116). As evidence, Elson (1992) has reported that more than one-third of those enrolled in U.S. colleges and universities are nontraditional students who are age 35 and older. Similarly, the U.S. Department of Education reported that 90 million adult Americans returned to the classroom in 1999 alone, meaning 46% of the nation's entire population (Greenberg, 2000); thus, signifying a clear shift in what was once considered the traditional student¹ demographic within higher education in the U.S. So, in spite of the fact that educational opportunities for adult and nontraditional students

have never been greater, the availability of academic services for such learners has not similarly risen (DiSilvestro, 1981).

Team Selection

Nevertheless, in using the Delphi method, a multi-step, survey-based process planning method, university leaders can work to meet these students' needs. The first step of this planning model focuses on assembling a team whose members are familiar with the university's student population. Per Alexander and Serfass (1999), it is important that those who take part in the development of a Delphi survey be people who are part of the organization, as well as those who are primary customers or consumers in the organization.

The Importance of Identifying and Serving Adult Learners

Because more and more university populations are made up of adult learners, it is important to assess whether the unique needs of this group are being met by the university's faculty, staff, and support services. In doing so, it is hoped that university planners, administrators, and faculty will become more aware of how to better serve this demographic; thus, helping to enhance retention and, ultimately, graduation numbers for universities overall. Further, it is during this, the second step of the Delphi method, that it is important for team members to recognize the significance adult students and their needs.

Administrators need to be prepared to address the ways in which their programs can improve the sometimes-limited services that are provided to these students, in addition to creatively and collaboratively working to augment those services, as needed. To recognize the needs of adult learners, then, it is important for the participating experts to be appraised, at least to some extent, on the literature surrounding such learners, including how these learners are defined.

Granted, there are a multitude of definitions, yet a single commonality does exist among such students in that adults "are held more responsible for their actions in all facets of their lives, including education" (Osgood-Treston, 2001, p. 121). In sampling supporting literature, Dill and Henley (1998) refer to adult learners, or "nontraditional students," as being those learners who (a) embark upon a post-secondary education at least one year after graduating high school and (b) juggle multiple roles, from parent, employee or employer, to student, spouse and more. Nellen (2003), similarly, has described nontraditional learners as being "older students with a job and family responsibilities, and often entering [educational] ... programs on a part-time basis (p. 290), while Neeley, Niemi, and Ehrhard (1998), among others, have described adult learners as those who return to school after having spent a period of time engaged in other pursuits or life activities.

In summation, while it is not uncommon to see the term "nontraditional student" used interchangeably with that of the "adult learner" moniker, it is important to note that it is far too short-sighted "to view anyone over the age of 25 as an adult learner and any program serving adult learners as adult education," because the literature concerning adult education and adult learners is much too broad to draw such a conclusion (Osgood-Treston, 2001, p. 121).

Scenario Presentation and Rationale

Alexander and Serfass (1999) have described scenario planning as "a process for developing stories or likely series of events that provide probable futures, with a focus on predetermined and uncertain environments for the purpose of decision making" (p. 114). Meanwhile, Tucker (1999) has identified it is a process that is "best described as creating stories of equally plausible futures and planning as though any one could move forward" (p. 70). In reviewing what scenario planning is, however, it is important also to look at what it is not. For example, Willmore has said that "scenario planning is not an attempt to predict the future. While it is tempting to view it as such and to try to write scenarios that forecast what the future will be, such efforts are doomed to fail" (2001, p. 25).

Moreover, because organizations, including higher education, are generally under-prepared for the future, this unpreparedness can be blamed not on planners' lack of trying to forecast the future for their organizations, but rather, on the planners' limited perceptions of what is to come. Thus, by developing scenarios we are not attempting to predict the future, we are exposing our "perceptual limitations thus allowing us to spot issues, trends, and developments that we would be otherwise unaware" (Willmore, 2001, p. 25).

The Futuring Tree

Alexander and Serfass (1999) describe the Futuring Tree as "a goal-oriented tool that starts with a description of the future state and works backward ... to connect an organization's future with its present" (p. 152). The purpose of this planning tool is enable those who employ it to identify a future goal, then work backward to establish what must be accomplished to reach the goal (Alexander & Serfass, 1999, p. 152).

In creating a Futuring Tree, one must pay close attention to determining the priority pathways between an organization's "present state" and "future state." Moreover, it is vital, in keeping with Futuring Tree's methodology, those concerned with adult learners should adhere to the following key vision themes:

1. Continually strengthen and enhance academic advising and student-support services for students to promote the quality of student life and create a learning environment that is conducive to learning and personal development.
2. Actively develop and implement academic and student services programs to better meet the needs of those students who have major life responsibilities outside of the classroom and campus. This typically includes students who work full time, are married, have children, have returned to complete their college education following a period of time spent working, in the military, or rearing their children, among other life pursuits.
3. Encourage student-centered learning and development for all students, including nontraditional and adult learners, by working to strengthen the participation of faculty and staff in the developmental advising of students. It is hoped that by doing so, students' academic and life successes will be enhanced, and in turn, an organization or university's retention and graduation numbers will register an increase.

According to Alexander and Serfass (1999), "Priority pathways will be established based upon the organizations needs and resources" (p. 164). It also is important to acknowledge and consciously work to meet the unique needs of adult learners, if the university is to truly serve its entire student population, not merely its

"traditional-aged" population. In turn, a first step in doing so would involve not only the creation of a nontraditional/adult student-centered workshop that offers tips, suggestions, and resources to these learners in an effort to enhance their college experiences, but also improve a school's faculty awareness concerning the unique academic, advising, and related support needs of these learners.

In stressing the need for adult learners' to have their academic-related needs met, King and Richardson (1998) have observed the following: "Adult students confront somewhat novel problems in adjusting to a traditional academic setting. They express fears about competing and fitting in with 18-22-year-old students. They question their ability to understand and retain large quantities of information ... and adult learners may exhibit fewer skills for coping with an academic environment" (p. 25). Further, it should be noted that within the academic setting, in any group of adult learners, there will be a more diverse range of individual differences than in a similar setting made up of younger adult students, for adults enter into educational endeavors with more experiences and a different quality of experiences than do traditional students (Knowles, 1986).

Therefore, it is imperative that undergraduate advising staffs not only recognize and address the needs of traditional students, but also those of adult learner and nontraditional student groups. It is projected that by doing so, not only will these learners experience greater levels of academic success and personal satisfaction from the university/college experience, but a school's overall retention and graduation numbers will be increased.

Conclusion

Clearly, for many reasons it is in the best interest of post-secondary institutions, to begin to identify the ever-increasing numbers of adult learners on their campuses and, in turn, implement a developmental advising approach toward meeting the needs of these students. To do so would not only enhance the learning environment for nontraditional students, but also serve to benefit the colleges and universities that recognize the unique needs of these adult students. According to Daloz (1999), if college and university officials and faculty—including advising and teaching faculty—are aware of what is important to their students as individuals, they can better connect the students' lives with the institutions' respective curriculums. To this end, Daloz posits that:

Effective advising is more than just spewing out distribution requirements and intercepting regulations. ... Thus, we may shuffle credits and distribute requirements, but more important is our support and advocacy for the student, and more important still is our loyalty to the tradition of learning and intellectual accomplishment. If the first is allowed to eclipse the other two, we compromise our students and betray our commitment. (1999, p. 111)

Advising staff musts begin to proactively address the needs of adult learners, not just a university's traditional-aged student population. As previously suggested, however, before the unique needs of adult learners can be adequately met by academe, those within higher education must first formally identify the adult learners among their student populations, then take well-thought-out steps toward ensuring that advising is central to the educational process of these learners.

As evidence, Osgood-Treston (2001) has asserted that social theories of attrition have correlated student persistence to acclimation. Says Osgood-Treston: "(If) students feel comfortable in and accepted by the campus community, they tend to stay longer. It is logical that this would hold true whether the students were just out of high

school or heading toward retirement” (2001, p. 121).

As for those colleges and universities that ultimately fail to respond to the ever-evolving needs of their student populations; namely, adult students, Levine projects that over time, others will readily do so. "It is easy to imagine the creation of stripped-down, profit-making colleges. ... Such schools," he says, "quite possibly, could offer excellent service, lower cost, and high-quality programs without [unneeded] extras" (Levine, 1993, p. 4).

In short, Bates (2000) has suggested that "perhaps the biggest challenge [in education] is the lack of vision," while Howell, Williams, and Lindsay (2003), similarly, indicate that it is the trends in higher education that will most influence the future of learning. Indeed, the future is largely uncertain, yet because of this, many choose to ignore it, refusing to plan for the opportunities that it may bring. Such a viewpoint, is unwise, however, for organizational successes—including those within higher education—are often rooted in future-oriented thinking and planning (e.g., scenario planning, trend extrapolation, Delphi surveys, etc.).

After all, as has been succinctly observed, "To meet the challenges of the future, we need to find out about what we can plausibly expect in the years ahead so we can understand what our options are. We can then set reasonable goals and develop effective strategies for achieving them" (World Future Society, 2002, available at <http://www.wfs.org>).

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Footnotes

¹ For the purposes of this article, *nontraditional students* are those learners who have multiple roles (e.g., parent, employee, student, etc.) and at least one year between high school and college.

² The term *traditional student*, for the purposes of this article, may be defined as those college or university students who enrolled in college directly after high school and who do not typically have multiple roles (e.g., parent, spouse, employee).

About the Author

Dr. Lisa L. Rollins, Ph.D., Ed.S., is an assistant professor of journalism and mass communication in the College of Liberal Arts at Ashford University, San Diego, Calif.

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