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## Lean on Me: The Importance of a Social Support Network for Adult Students

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### **Abstract**

Social support and social support networks are important factors in creating positive feelings of self-efficacy and confidence and helping to mitigate negative feelings or behaviors. Typically used in health and wellness environments, their utility in academic settings to address issues of student persistence is an emerging practice that continues to show promise. This chapter outlines the history and impact of these supports from the context of student affairs and the behavioral sciences and shares emerging best practices for consideration. The chapter concludes with several key principles and characteristics of social supports that can help inform practices that educational leaders can consider when serving adult students in the most holistic way possible.

## Overview

For the typical adult learner, the completion of a degree or certificate program represents a type of accomplishment that has many facets. Along with the receipt of the degree is the collection of interesting stories that come along with such an endeavor. Many of these stories recount long hours of studying and the challenge of balancing school with occupational demands and family obligations, two defining characteristics of this population (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007).

Invariably, these stories also contain the memories of individuals along the scholastic journey who provided timely support and encouragement, much of which proved critical. As such, a gesture common at commencement exercises includes the public recognition of those family members and friends, thanking them for their support.

*Social support* or *social support networks* are critical factors in student success (Conner, 2015). Social supports can be defined as networks of relationships that a person has; they have long been used in the psychology literature as a mechanism for promoting resilience and well-being (Juliano & Yunes, 2014). In the context of education, research has pointed to several positive effects of social supports including mitigating student burnout (Chang, Eddins-Folensbee, & Coverdale, 2012) and helping increase degree completion rates (Jairam & Kahl, 2012).

Social support among adult learners is a critical aspect of student success. This chapter includes a list of practical ways that social supports can be fostered within the institution and apart from it. Furthermore, some of the positive auxiliary effects initiated by the institution resulting in informal social networks will be discussed. Institutions that recognize and understand the psychosocial aspects of adult learners are that much more prepared to help overcome barriers to completion for these students and thus create the excellent experience that they deserve.

## Review of the Literature

Foundations for an exploration in adult student success lie in understanding concepts found in both the student development and the psychological and behavioral science literature. Student development theory

provides a basis for understanding the perspectives of self-identity, development, and other factors arising within the learning context (Evans, Forney, & Guido, 2009). Theorists such as Freud and Jung proved instrumental to the field of student development, which began simply as the practice of vocational guidance and preparation. Student development would evolve to include addressing complex student needs (Evans et al., 2009). Moreover, addressing students' needs required understanding students' sense of self-identity and their psychosocial stages of development. This new responsibility requires the university administration—the student services office—to be knowledgeable in psychological developmental theories such as those of Erikson (1959) and Chickering (1979), among others.

Common among the theories is the idea that there are stages of human development and associated needs therein. Erikson (1959) suggested that in certain stages of development, namely the young and middle adulthood stage where most adult learners are, success is linked to having comfortable relationships that can mitigate feelings of loneliness and isolation. Similarly, Chickering (1979) found several interrelated components that contributed to one's sense of identity, one of which was the importance of developing interdependence and interpersonal relationships. By all accounts, these developmental theories agree on the idea that identity is socially constructed and that environmental influences, the campus environment, and other external influences are critical elements to help students succeed (Torres, Jones, & Renn, 2009).

As increasing numbers of adult learners entered university studies, Knowles (1984) recognized the unique needs of adult learners and provided a framework for learning that emphasizes the process of instruction beyond the actual content. Adult learning is characterized by an emphasis on experience as the basis for learning; an immediate life or job relevance to the subject; active participation; and a focus on problem solving and solutions rather than just content (Knowles, 1984; Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2005). Building on these frameworks, Merriam (2004) found strong linkages between the way adults learn and changes in their personal dispositions and attitudes, both of which depend on a strong sense of personal, critical reflection. Chen (2012) found that self-reflection, meaningful connections, and strong interpersonal relationships were found to affect the development of other positive self-concepts. These interpersonal relationships provided a foundation for social support networks.

## Integration into the Student Experience

Researchers have historically explored the idea of social supports in studies of health and wellness (Eklund & Hansson, 2007; Low & Molzahn, 2007). Chaichanawirote and Higgins (2013) found that strong networks of social relationships with older adults resulted in increased receptivity to health-care interventions.

Wrzus, Hänel, Wagner, and Neyer (2013) conducted a meta-analysis of social support networks and life events across the life span and found that these networks vary according to the circumstances in a person's life. Within the educational experience, social support networks have been attributed to increasing a student's sense of self-efficacy and neutralizing the effects of student burnout. Rigg, Day, and Adler (2013) researched the impact of social support on graduate students and found that students who have supportive relationships both from within and outside the institution experience less exhaustion and strong feelings of self-efficacy and engagement. These effects can help adult students overcome barriers that prevent them from being successful in school and gain balance from juggling multiple roles in their lives.

The research on social support networks justifies a reexamination of the processes and relationships that occur in traditional graduate teaching experiences. Informal ties and relationships with faculty and others who provide encouragement have been shown to help students balance the demands of graduate study (Hunt, Mair, & Atkinson, 2012). Networks of collaboration within a supportive environment cultivate a sense of collective efficacy, which results in better student achievement (Moolenaar, Slegers, & Daly, 2012). Institutions can affect student satisfaction, and improve student experiences, by cultivating an environment of positive support for students.

The notion of mentoring also falls within the sphere of support networks in education. Improving outcomes for students includes support structures and programs that mitigate the effects of burnout. Mentoring is one such avenue that has been shown to help prevent student dropout (Crisp, 2010). The traditional mentoring relationship commonly occurs between a mentor and mentee for help in such areas of career exploration and personal and professional goals. However, informal interactions of the mentoring relationship have also been found to be beneficial for students, especially those who would not otherwise seek a formal process or

arrangement. Khalil (2008) explored this idea of informal mentoring, using a technology platform, for students with disabilities in higher education and found that the students experienced satisfaction with this innovative and informal arrangement.

## Student Support Networks in Practice

Fostering student success and a sense of community for adult students is a shared responsibility across the campus. Educational leaders in higher education, from the initial admissions and student services personnel to the faculty and other staff, must first know the needs of adult students to create a culture that is both welcoming and supportive, especially to those students who have been away from school for a time. Furthermore, traditional methods of support such as faculty office hours and advising appointments better serve traditionally enrolled students that may not have the complex characteristics and demands that adult students have.

Several valuable principles emerge from the adult learning tradition that can inform practices used today. One principle is establishing an environment where the university leaders, staff, and faculty are perceived to be approachable and exhibit sensitivities to student needs. By creating a learning community where instructors move from an authoritarian and dogmatic role to more of a knowledgeable guide and colleague, students are committed to working harder and being more engaged in learning (Barkley, 2010).

Encouraging students to develop their relationships and social networks outside the formal classroom setting is a common practice that has also been effective. For adult students especially, entering a different environment can be both exhilarating and intimidating; programs that provide social and academic support can serve as emotional buffers during periods of stress and anxiety. Who better to relate to the adult student than a fellow student experiencing similar stressors? For this reason, institutions commonly foster student support groups around a variety of issues connected to the topic of study or need.

One institutionalized practice includes formal programs that serve the needs of adult and returning students. The TRiO program is an example of a federal program designed to focus specifically on outreach to the returning adult, first-generation, low-income, and veteran students. Beyond the traditional offering of study skills interventions and tutoring,

TRiO programs have provided regular opportunities for students to share insights with each other in small group settings and other social opportunities to connect, improve self-efficacy, and build camaraderie, all contributing to student success (Grier-Reed & Ganuza, 2012).

### Lessons Learned, Tips for Success, and Recommendations

While formal and institutional support networks are helpful to many students, informal student support networks can be equally, if not more, important to adult students. Informal support networks include both topic-specific academic groups or practical nonacademic functions like book exchanges or babysitting support. Since most adult students do not have the time to participate in traditional forms of formal support activities, these ad-hoc-type events coalescing for a particular time and purpose are often welcomed.

O'Connor and Cordova's (2010) work provided several examples of theory applied to practice when it comes to the experience of adult students and the supports they need for success. These features included:

- regular attendance in external organizations such as churches that serve as an existing community and provide emotional support;
- the occasional "break" from school in the form of a semester off or a lesser credit load to deal with life challenges;
- support from employers who know that the employee is currently in school;
- methods of instruction that acknowledge students' life experiences and are matched to their particular learning styles; and
- opportunities for social events that focus on building community.

### Conclusion

The growth of the nontraditional and adult student population brings new challenges for institutions of higher education. The National Center for Education Statistics project enrollment for adult students to outpace that of traditional students (US Department of Education, 2015), and schools that recognize the unique features of this demographic and also create

environments of support, whether formal or informal, will be a step ahead of those institutions that do not.

The history of student support and student services gives us a glimpse into this continuing evolution and desire to serve the "whole needs of the student," and student development theory provides a look into what possible specific interventions along the development cycle can be most effective to help bring about feelings of confidence and self-efficacy. It is that sense of confidence and self-efficacy that correlates to students finding meaning and purpose (Kramer, 2009).

The variety of positive effects resulting from social supports cannot be underestimated. While social supports typically address academic issues like writing and study habits, it is the informal social supports that have shown to influence the psychosocial dimension in adult students, mitigating the negative effects of burnout and exhaustion. Moreover, the external social supports such as empathy and encouragement from fellow students and family members, if combined with strong institutional and traditional programs of student support, show strong promise. Current and future leaders of these institutions would be wise to recognize and take advantage of these opportunities to create the campuses of the future.

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Joel L. Domingo is an Associate Professor and Associate Program Director of Higher Education and Nonprofit Leadership at City University of Seattle and has a history of leadership and teaching in education, community, and civic organizations. His work focuses on exploring issues of leadership, developing strong communities and schools, disability issues, and creating socially transformative practices for education and the non-profit sector. Dr. Domingo holds a BA from the University of Washington, an MA in theology from Fuller Theological Seminary, and an EdD in educational leadership from Argosy University.