

Factors that Affect Returning to Graduate School for International and American Adult Learners

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Abstract

A growing body of research has identified the motivational factors of adult learners who participate in educational activities. Previous studies have examined domestic adult learners; however, there has been limited research on motivational factors that drive international adult learners to pursue graduate programs in American institutions. This study examined motivational factors that affect both international and American domestic learners to return to graduate school. It also compared differences between these two groups based on gender and motivational factors.

Background

An adult learner is typically defined as 25 years of age and older (Kasworm, Polson, & Fishback, 2002). In the past few decades, the number of adult students enrolled in graduate school has increased among American institutions. The U.S. Bureau of Census (2012) reported that in 2009, there were 3,752,000 adult learners enrolled in graduate school. The number of those adult learners age ranged from 25 to 34 years old was 1,556,000, and 1,194,000 adult students' age ranged from 35 years old and over.

Meanwhile, the population of international students increases rapidly. The Institute of International Education (2012) reports that from 2012 to 2013, the number of international student enrollment in higher education was 724,725 compared with the enrollment number 679,338 in the years 2011-2012. Among them, 311,204 international students enrolled in graduate programs in 2012-2013. However, data of different age groups of international adult learners are limited.

When considering about those adult learners, people might want to know why those who have jobs, families or have been away from campus for a long time want to return to school? Are motivational factors different between American and international students towards returning to campus? Are there any motivational differences between male and female adult learners reentry graduate programs since women are expected to

balance school, work, and home responsibilities (Miles, 2009)? In addition, previous researchers have suggested that faculty, administrators, advisors, or counselor in higher educational institutions need to understand the reasons of adult learners participate in higher education (Boshier, 1976, 1989; Tinto, 1987; Schlossberg, Lynch, & Chickering, 1989; Merriam et al., 2012). By understanding their reasons to enter higher education, colleges and universities will be able to improve school service and education for the adult student population (Boshier, 1976, 1989; Merriam et al., 2012; Ross, 1988; Schlossberg, Lynch & Chickering, 1989).

Literature Review

In 1961, Houle interviewed 22 adults and identified three motivational orientations of the adult learners: 1. goal-oriented; 2. activity-orientated; 3. learning-oriented.

The goal-oriented

The goal-oriented students are those who use education as a means for accomplishing a goal (Houle, 1961). Houle (1961) described that adult learners who choose to continue higher education often begins with the realization of a need or the identification of interests. Setting goals is important to adult learners since they desire to make progress toward accomplishing the goal (Comings, 2007; Kerka, 2005). According to previous research, vocational reasons, such as obtaining employment and meeting financial needs, improving both salary and job status, and training for careers and expanding opportunities are primary goal-orientated motives for adult learners returning to higher education (Adelstein et al., 1983; Badenhoop & Johansen, 1980; Christian & Wilson, 1985; Clayton & Smith, 1987; Rifenbary, 1995; Stein, Wanstreet & Trinko, 2011; Thomas, 2001). Similarly, Bohonos (2014) listed five different characteristics for adult learners returning and participating in higher education. Those are: 1) nonprofessional workers who want to advance their career; 2) professionals who want to change career fields; 3) workers who are displaced professionals; 4) workers who are concerned about being displaced; 5) professionals who need a degree for promotion. In addition, Ali (2013) investigated adult learners who returned to higher education and found that they considered financial gain and acquisition of latest professional knowledge as two major reasons of their enrollment. Williams's (1996) survey of returning male adult learners discovered that they return to school primarily for professional advancement. On the other hand, being a good role model for their children motivated female learners return to school (Rodriguez, 1996; Thomas, 2001). Additionally, some women returned to campus for the reason of providing children with further opportunities (Clayton & Smith, 1987; Kerka, 2005).

The activity-oriented

The activity-oriented students focus on social activities instead of learning itself (Houle, 1961). Similarly, other researchers stated that obtaining a degree is another motive for adult learners returning to higher education (Christian & Wilson, 1985; Thomas, 2001). This group of adult learners continues their education for social or activity reasons, such as making friends, getting rid of loneliness, looking for their future spouses, escaping from their personal or emotional problems, relationships, or simply pursuing the diplomas, certificates, or degrees which make them feel good. Houle (1961) categorized them as course-takers and group-joiners. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) described them as affected and responsive to their social environment. Williams's (1996) research results showed that compare to female adult learners, the social interaction is one of the least motivators for male graduate students. However, researchers found that female adult learners are more likely to return school when their children are older or when they experience empty nests (Mohnney & Anderson, 1988; Pickering & Galvin-Schafers, 1988).

The learning-oriented

Houle (1961) defined learning-oriented adult learners as focusing on learning and seeking for gaining knowledge. He also found that adult learners in this category either have the desire to know something or purely enjoy studying and learning. Based on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs people who are at the top level of the need pyramid have the desire of self-actualization or self-fulfillment (1943, 1962). They are seeking for self-growth and trying to become the best of themselves. In addition, previous research found that developing a sense of achievement and making personal changes, which lead to self-improvement, motivate adult learners going back to higher education (Clayton & Smith, 1987; Rifenyary, 1995). According to Stephens-Lowndes (1994), African-Americans are more likely motivated by self-actualization and a desire to contribute to society compared to other ethnicity groups. In addition to self-actualization, researchers also found that personal satisfaction, academic/cognitive interests, and advance personal education are factors that motivate adult learners going back to graduate school (Ali, 2013; Belcheir, 1996; Flynn, 2006; Pratt, et al., 1999). However, there is limited research that investigates the gender differences.

International Students' Motivational Orientations

Research on international students indicated that international adult learners seek to obtain academic, cultural, and global consciousness development, personal growth benefits, and internships abroad (Altbach, 2004; Dwyer & Peters, 2004). Moreover, international students come to the US because of "its large and diverse economy, the willingness of employers to hire well-qualified foreigners, and the high salaries available in many fields, including in academe" (Altbach, 2004). Sánchez,

Fornerino, and Zhang (2006) and Willis (2004) found that most of the Chinese participants had a strong intention to study abroad due to the fact that study abroad help them to find a good job and work for international companies, thereby enhancing their social status. Other reasons for these adult learners include wishing to pursue an advanced degree and improve their language abilities at the same time (Sánchez et al., 2006). Meanwhile, Sánchez et al. (2006) also found that students from different countries had different motivations to drive them study abroad. For example, most French students were looking for a new experience instead of improving their career possibilities. Limited research has been done on motivational factors as well as gender differences that drive international students to pursue graduate programs in American institutes.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine gender and motivational factors for international and American adult learners returning to graduate school programs. This study examined:

- 1) Motivational differences between International and American returning adult students;
- 2) Motivational differences between males and females returning adult students.

The results of this study can assist higher educational institutions in understanding why these two groups of student return to graduate programs as well as ways of improving school services and administration efforts.

Methods

Participants

The participants for this study were current master's and doctorate students who were 25-years old or older at a major university in the southeastern United States. Four hundred and thirty-nine adult learners participated in this survey with total of 362 usable responses. The usable response rate is 82.5%. Among the valid data, there were 175 (48.3%) male adult learners and 187 (51.7%) female adult learners. In addition, there were 90 (24.9%) international adult students and 272 (75.1%) American adult learners. The proportion of American graduate students in this university is 73.56%, while international graduate students is 26.44%. A goodness-of-fit test result indicated that the sample can represent the population of this university ($\chi^2_{(1)} = 0.51, p = .48$).

Among the international adult learners, 36 (40%) participants were from China, and 12 (13%) from India. The rest of the participated international students came from

other countries, such as South Korea, Iran, Turkey, Jordan, Australia, etc. Among all participants, 156 (43.1%) are pursuing Master's degrees, while 206 (56.9%) are pursuing PhD degrees.

Participants' age ranges from 25 to 71 ($M = 33.4$, $SD = 8.73$). Around 55.5% of them are married, and 41.2% of them are single. In addition, 61.6% of the participants reported they do not have kids, while 33.2% have at least 1 child. Furthermore, 70.8% of the participants have at least 1 year away from their previous degree, whereas 46.1% of them have at least 5 years away from their previous degree.

Instrumentation

The instrument utilized for this study included: the Educational Participation Scale/A-Form (EPS/A-Form) and demographic questions.

Educational Participation Scale (EPS)

Based on Houle's (1961) initial study, Boshier developed EPS in 1971 and published an alternative EPS form (EPS/A-form) in 1991, which consists of 42 4-point Likert-typed items for understanding the motivational orientations of adult learners. Individuals are asked to rate each item from "no influence" as 1 to "much influence" as 4. EPS (A-form) identifies seven motivational orientations: 1. communication improvement (COM); 2. social contact (SOC); 3. educational preparation (EDUC); 4. professional advancement (ADV); 5. family togetherness (FAM); 6. social stimulation (STIM); 7. cognitive interest (COG). Based on Fujita-Starck (1996), the internal consistency Cronbach's alpha for the overall scale is .92. The internal consistency Cronbach's alpha for each motivational orientation was ranged from .75 to .95. The internal consistency Cronbach's alpha from the data of current study was ranged from .72 to .93 for each motivational orientation and .93 for the overall scale.

Procedure

Data was collected during the Fall, 2014 to early Spring, 2015 semesters. The Graduate School sent out the invitation email with the link to the online anonymous questionnaire to all graduate students who were over 25 years old while the study was conducted. In addition, the International Student Program of the University sent the same survey invitation to international students who were categorized as adult learners. The informed consent letter was attached with the invitation email. The electronic survey was hosted by Qualtrics. After data collection, the data file was downloaded for analysis.

Data Analysis

The current study examined the difference in motivational orientations between genders and student status. The dependent variables are the seven motivational orientations. The independent variables are: gender (female vs. male) and student status (International vs. American). A Factorial MANOVA was used to examine the main effects of gender and student status as well as the interaction effect via SPSS version 23. Significant level was set at $\alpha=.05$.

Results

Table 1 presents the descriptive information by gender and student status for the seven EPS motivational orientations in this study. Both gender and student status groups had the strongest motivational orientation among all in Professional Advancement, while Family Togetherness was the weakest of all.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics of EPS by Gender and Student Status

Scale	Gender		Student Status		Overall	Cronbach's alpha
	<u>Male</u>	<u>Female</u>	<u>International</u>	<u>American</u>		
Communication	1.62	1.53	2.28	1.34	1.57	.88
Improvement	(0.72)	(0.71)	(0.85)	(0.47)	(0.71)	
Social Contact	1.64	1.58	2.15	1.43	1.61	.93
	(0.71)	(0.68)	(0.83)	(0.54)	(0.70)	
Educational	1.86	1.85	2.19	1.74	1.85	.72
Preparation	(0.68)	(0.62)	(0.70)	(0.59)	(0.65)	
Professional	3.37	3.44	3.39	3.42	3.41	.79
Advancement	(0.62)	(0.63)	(0.65)	(0.61)	(0.62)	
Family	1.37	1.36	1.72	1.25	1.37	.76
Togetherness	(0.50)	0.46)	(0.66)	(0.33)	(0.48)	

Social	1.46	1.52	1.76	1.40	1.49	.80
Simulation	(0.54)	(0.57)	(0.68)	(0.47)	(0.55)	
Cognitive	2.71	2.73	2.84	2.67	2.71	.83
Interest	(0.72)	(0.81)	(0.60)	(0.81)	(0.77)	

The motivational orientation scores were analyzed by a 2X2 factorial MANOVA with two levels of gender (male and female) and two levels of student status (international and American students). Box's M test of equal covariance was statistically significant ($p < .001$), indicating the inequality of variance-covariance matrices of the motivational orientation scores across levels of the gender and student status. Therefore, Pillai's Trace statistic was used to assess the effects.

The multivariate interaction effect of Gender and Student Status was statistically significant with moderate effect size, Pillai's Trace=.06, $F(7, 352)=2.94$, $p=.005$, partial $\eta^2=.06$. In addition, Student Status main effect was statistically significant with large effect size, Pillai's Trace=.39, $F(7,352)= 32.03$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2=.39$, whereas the Gender main effect was not statistically significant, Pillai's Trace=.03, $F(7, 352)=1.68$, $p=.11$.

Factorial ANOVAs were conducted on each motivational orientation scores to determine the locus of the significant interaction and Student Status main effects (see Table 2). Levene's test indicating equal variance between groups on each motivational orientation scores ($p > .05$). There were statistically significant interaction effects between Gender and Student Status in Communication Improvement, Social Contact, and Professional Advancement orientations with small effect size ($F(1,358)=7.12$, $p=.01$, partial $\eta^2=.02$; $F(1,358)=4.40$, $p=.04$, partial $\eta^2=.01$; $F(1,358)=7.14$, $p=.01$, partial $\eta^2=.02$, respectively). Further investigations on the simple main effects indicated that male international students ($M=2.15$, $SD=0.89$) had higher levels of Communication Improvement motivational orientation than male American students ($M=1.35$, $SD=0.41$, $p < .001$) whereas female international students ($M=2.52$, $SD=0.70$) also had higher level of Communication Improvement scores than female American students ($M=1.33$, $SD=0.52$, $p < .001$). Similarly, for Social Contact motivational orientation subscale, male international students ($M=2.04$, $SD=0.82$) had higher scores than male American students ($M=1.44$, $SD=0.55$, $p < .001$) as well as female international students ($m=2.35$, $SD=0.82$) had higher scores than female American students ($M=1.42$, $SD=0.54$, $p < .001$). As for the Professional Advancement motivational orientation, there was no statistically significant difference between male international students ($M=3.47$, $SD=0.60$) and male American students ($M=3.32$, $SD=0.62$). However, female international students ($M=3.22$, $SD=0.73$) had lower scores than female American students ($M=3.48$, $SD=0.60$, $p=.031$).

In addition, there were statistically significant Student Status main effect in Communication Improvement, Social Contact, Educational Preparation, Family Togetherness, and Social Stimulation motivational orientations with moderate to large effect size ($F(1,358)=181.32, p<.001, \text{partial } \eta^2=.34$; $F(1,358)=94.19, p<.001, \text{partial } \eta^2=.21$; $F(1,358)=36.10, p<.001, \text{partial } \eta^2=.09$; $F(1,358)=82.85, p<.001, \text{partial } \eta^2=.19$; $F(1,358)=37.17, p<.001, \text{partial } \eta^2=.09$, respectively). International students had higher levels of each motivational orientation scores than American students did (see Table 1).

Table 2

Follow-up Factorial ANOVA Results

Effects	Motivational Orientations	F (1,358)	p-value	Partial η^2
Interaction	Communication Improvement	7.12	.01	.02
Effect	Social Contact	4.40	.04	.01
	Educational Preparation	0.12	.73	.00
	Professional Advancement	7.14	.01	.02
	Family Togetherness	1.21	.27	.003
	Social Stimulation	2.13	.15	.006
	Cognitive Interest	0.12	.73	.00
	Student	Communication Improvement	181.32	<.001
Status Main	Social Contact	94.19	<.001	.21
	Educational Preparation	36.10	<.001	.09
Effect	Professional Advancement	0.52	.47	.001
	Family Togetherness	82.85	<.001	.19
	Social Stimulation	37.17	<.001	.09
	Cognitive Interest	3.75	.05	.01

Discussion

Each of Boshier's (1991) seven motivational orientations can be located within Houle's (1961) three motivational orientations. Some of the seven motivational orientations may belong to more than one Houle's orientation.

1) Motivational difference between International and American returning adult students.

According to the results, both returning international and American adult learners are motivated most by professional advancement (ADV). This finding confirms a previous study that vocational reasons were a primary motivation for adult learners returning to school (Clayton & Smith, 1987; Rifken, 1994). In other words, to obtain employment or improve both salary and job status may be the goal of adult learners (Badenhoop & Johansen, 1980; Christian & Wilson, 1985; Thomas, 2001). Furthermore, results confirmed previous studies that in order to find a good job, work for international companies, and/or enhance social status, international students will strive to study abroad (Sánchez, Fornerino & Zhang, 2006; Willis, 2004). Though both international and American adult learners are motivated by professional advancement, female American adult learners have a stronger professional advancement need than female international adult learners. In other words, female American adult students may have an overwhelming ambition to obtain a better job, to secure a professional advancement, or to get a higher status in their current job than female international adult students.

Previous research also demonstrated that personal satisfaction strongly motivates adult learners to return to study (Belcher, 1996; Flynn, 2006; Pratt et al., 1999). Though researchers indicate that personal education improvement is the top reason for adult learners' enrollment (Ali, 2013), this study's findings argue that COG is a second strong motivator for adult learners when making decisions of returning to school.

Both male and female international adult students have a stronger COM than American adult students respectively. Previous research claimed that International adult learners wish to gain language experience during the time they study abroad (Sánchez et al., 2006). Findings of this study substantiate this conclusion. International adult learners come to US for graduate study long for improving their language skills, learning another language, or to speak and write better. Studying at US institutes may be an advantageous way to learn English for international students whose native language is not English.

Both male and female international students have a stronger SOC than American students respectively. In other words, compared with American students, international

students consider SOC more important. This implies that international students are more interested in looking for new friends or meeting with different people.

In addition, EDUC is a more important motivational factor to international returning adult learners than American adult learners. This finding indicates that international returning adult learners tend to do better preparation for either making up education that they missed in early life or for further education.

What is more, the current study reveals that though FAM has the least influence on both adult learners' decision, international students consider this motivational factor more important than American students. International adult returning learners may have a higher family pressure or a stronger determination to keep up with family members or become a good role model for their children that push them to continue an advanced degree.

Similarly to previous research, the present findings illustrate that international students study abroad are motivated greatly by STIM. In other words, they seek new experiences (Sánchez et al., 2006) and exploration of a different life style.

2) Motivational difference between male and female returning adult students.

Though previous studies were examined, female adult learners return to campus for the reason that they intend to become a good role model for their children or to provide their children with further opportunities (Clayton & Smith, 1987; Kerka, 2005; Rodriguez, 1996; Thomas, 2001). However, the present findings dispute that there is no differences of FAM between male and female adult learners. In other words, both male and females have similar interests in being a good role model for their children by pursuing graduate studies. In summary, male and female adult learners may not have much difference of motivational orientations when making decisions of returning to school.

Limitations and Implications

There are several limitations of the present study. First of all, survey questions were based on self-reporting and also relied on the understanding and truthfulness of the participants. Secondly, this study was limited by the inclusion of only one university. Results of the participants may be influenced deeply by the institution's culture, which may not present all returning adult learners in other U.S. institutions. Finally, this study only included master and doctoral level students. It is possible that returning adult learners who are pursuing undergraduate degrees would provide different results.

Future studies could further explore reasons of returning adult learners based on each motivational orientation as well as other potential motivational factors that influence their returning to graduate programs.

In conclusion, this study has made a somewhat unique contribution to the field since it examined factors related to international graduate students. Moreover, this research provides a better understanding of these special populations, which can help higher education professionals better serve them in a variety of ways. First, based on the findings, universities and colleges can better improve school settings as well as student services for adult learners. In addition, since professional advancement is the strongest motivational orientation for adult learners, programs that focus on practice and application of skills should be built to provide more opportunities for adult learners. Furthermore, this research also encourages faculty to design more relevant, meaningful curriculum as well as applying proper teaching methods to fulfill the needs of returning adult learners. Lastly, this research can lead to not only a greater awareness of returning adult learners and their needs, but also provides ideas for higher education professionals to better plan and create an appropriate environment to serve these growing populations.

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