

Understanding and Supporting Adult Learners: A Guide for Colleges and Universities

Book by: Frederic Jacobs and Stephen P. Hundley

Review by: Jamila Evilsizor

Teaching and Adult Learning

University of North Texas

The demographics in higher education institutions are shifting. As early as in 2001, 40% of students enrolled were considered adult learners, over the age of 25. Adult learners due to age, responsibilities and circumstances have a different perspective and purpose when pursuing a degree. To ensure these students have the resources they need to succeed in post secondary education, it is advantageous to colleges and universities to not only relate to the students but adequately provide an environment that will promote lifelong learning.

Understanding and Supporting Adult Learners lays the foundation for “faculty, administrators, and senior leaders or policymakers” by explaining why higher educational institutions should be concerned with addressing these issues (p xiii). They provide detailed insights to the personal circumstances and motivations that drive adult learners. Without dwelling too much on theory, the authors provide a brief comparison of the learning methodologies that align to the practical application and experiential activities adult learners crave. This framework allows readers of various work backgrounds to level set on internal drivers that need to be considered when curating programs to support the sizable and growing portion of the student population.

Then, leveraging their own recommendations to provide practical examples to adults, the book delves into numerous profiles of issues that impact adult learners worldwide. These issues have been aggregated from a variety of educational institutions allowing the reader to see the varied incidents that could arise. The profiles are detailed and objective. The authors do well to present both sides of any conflict presented. For every student complaint, the institution’s or faculty member’s perspective is provided. This allows to the reader to remain an unbiased observer. The authors then proceed to question the reader on how to resolve the issue in an equitable way for all stakeholders. The series of questions are written so one is forced to critically break the issue down into all of it’s parts without bias; to slowly extract potential gaps in processes that could be resolved through a thorough investigation. Over a dozen different profiles categorized by issue type: student issues, faculty issues, institutional issues, and policy issues allow readers to selectively or comprehensively mine the book for the most likely problems to be present in their respective work area.

Fortunately, the book provides high level descriptions how each of these issues could be addressed to support adult learners while upholding the needs of faculty, staff and

the institution. While the resolutions are brief, the authors conclude with a comprehensive stratagem anyone looking to improve their adult learning environment could employ, from adjunct instructors to Vice Presidents of Student Affairs. While the stratagem is detailed and replicable regardless of situation, the authors would have done their audience a service if they had demonstrated the use of method by attempting to solve a handful of the issues they presented in previous chapters. Minimally, the readers would have benefitted had the authors provided an actual summary of how some of the case studies had attempted to resolve the issue at their institution and with what results.

Despite leaving the reader wondering, “What happened?” in some of the case studies, the book is a strong direct edification of why adult learning considerations should remain top of mind, and how all members of higher education can contribute to supporting these students in all aspects of the learning experience. With succinct yet strategic summarizations and detailed methodologies the audience is provided sufficient tools to make a positive impact in their sphere of influence.

References

Understanding and Supporting Adult Learners: A Guide for Colleges and Universities (2010).
Book by: Frederic Jacobs and Stephen P. Hundley. Review by: Jamila Evilsizor. San Francisco, CA: Jossy - Bass. 240 pp., \$42.00, (Hardcover) ISBN: 978-0-470-59254-0