Joy in the Academy in an Era of Uncertainty

50th Annual Conference

Held Online and In-Person

Online: February 25, 2026
In-person: March 19-20, 2026

Editor: Robert (Bobby) Gondola

Bradley (Brad) Wojtiuk, Conference Proceedings Committee Chair

Lisa Mahoney, Conference Proceedings Committee Member

Julie Skogsbergh, Conference Proceedings Committee Member

ePublication © September 30, 2026. Copyrights are maintained by the authors of each chapter. www.ahea.org

What is AHEA?

The purpose of the Adult and Higher Education Alliance (AHEA) is to help institutions of higher education develop and sustain learning environments and programs suitable for adults.

AHEA does this by:

• Providing a forum for professional educators to share resources and information about alternative degree programs on a national and international level.

• Stimulating practitioner research, thereby contributing to the integration of theory and practice, and promoting the improved quality of our efforts.

• Serving as a vehicle for cooperative consultation and collaboration among professionals in the field.

• Integrating interests and concerns from a variety of areas within adult higher education including distance, international, and liberal education.

• Promoting the rights of adult students.

• Influencing institutional and public policies concerning the principles of quality practice applied to adult education.

• Promoting cultural diversity and multicultural perspectives and maintaining that commitment through the incorporation of such perspectives into the policies, procedures, and practices of alternative degree programs for adults.

Letter from the AHEA Conference Proceedings Committee & Editor

Dear Reader,

We are pleased to present the Proceedings of the 50th annual conference of the Adult and Higher Education Alliance (AHEA), held online in February and in person in March 2026. This year's conference theme focuses us on 'Joy in Higher Education,' and it reflects our ongoing commitment to advancing the field. We extend special thanks to the AHEA Board of Directors, members, and contributors. With all of your support, this publication is possible.

As always, the AHEA Board of Directors provided continuous support for the mission of AHEA through their outreach, service, and presence. To AHEA members, we do what we do because of you. You are the backbone of AHEA's growth, networking, and collaboration. Thank you for your membership and participation in our organization and at our conference each year.

To those who contributed papers for these Proceedings, thank you for expanding our collective knowledge. Your research, theory, and practice strengthen our efforts to educate and serve adult learners in a variety of contexts. We appreciate your service to the larger community of professors, educators, and practitioners.

We know you will enjoy reading the variety of engaging topics focused on adult and higher education. We value your feedback and look forward to hearing from you. Your thoughts, ideas, and perspectives are encouraged. AHEA seeks ways to contribute to and support our shared endeavor of educating adults.

Thank you,

Robert (Bobby) Gondola, Proceedings Editor

Bradley (Brad) Wojtiuk, Proceedings Committee Chair

Lisa Mahoney, Proceedings Committee Member

Julie Skogsbergh, Proceedings Committee Member

Welcome from the AHEA President

Dear Colleagues,

On behalf of the Adult Higher Education Alliance (AHEA), I'm pleased to share the proceedings of the 50th AHEA Annual Conference held in 2026. This has been a golden year, acknowledging five decades of service to the practice as well as all of the adult learners that have benefitted from our efforts.

This year's theme, *Joy in the Academy in an Era of Uncertainty*, invited us all to consider Joy in the context of the academy today as well as the reality of each of our current circumstances. Through the steadfast leadership of many of our colleagues, Joy has been a source of sustaining and transformative force within adult and higher education. To that aim, I wish to recognize our previous President, Dr. Lisa Merriweather for her role in bringing Joy as a topic for our organization's diverse membership.

At a time when educators and learners alike are navigating uncertainty, change, burnout, and continued inequities, our conference challenged each of us to consider what it might mean to center Joy in our teaching, research, leadership, and in our communities. This year's theme was inspired by the forthcoming book, *When the "rainbow is enuf": Critical Race Love Letters from Black and Brown Women Adult Higher Education Educators Living in Joy*, edited by Lisa R. Merriweather, Cathy D. Howell, and Edith Gnanadass. Our conversations were further encouraged by a powerful panel of presenters; these adult educators helped us find new ways of thinking and reimagine old ways of doing.

These Proceedings extend those conversations and the richness of backgrounds, experiences, and research interests of our membership. The scholarship and practice detailed in these pages reflect what have distinguished AHEA for 50 years: a community committed to learning from one another, drawing connections between research with practice, and advancing meaningful opportunities for adult learners.

Thank you to this year's presenters, authors, members, volunteers, Board of Directors, and all who continue to contribute to this community. With gratitude for the adult educators who laid the foundation for these 50 years, and with eagerness for the next 50 years, we share the work of those of us represented in these Proceedings.

Richard (Rick) Silvia, Pharm.D., MA, FCCP, FAAPP, BCPP

President, AHEA (2026-27)

Table of Contents

The Adult Learner: Core Ideas Animating AHEA for 50 Years **7**
Xenia Coulter and Alan Mandell

Finding Fresh Perspectives: A Practical Guide to Empathy Interviewing in Adult and Higher Education **15**
Robert (Bobby) Gondola

Complex Racial Trauma in Andragogical Spaces: An Assessment of a Trauma-Informed GED Prep Program **23**
Gary Audas Jr.

Joy, Belonging, and Meaning-Making among Post-Traditional Students in Higher Education **31**
Jacob Miltenberger & Brad Wojtiuk

Inclusive and Accessible Learning: Designing Non-Formal and Hybrid Spaces for Adult Success **39**
Torialyn Draper-Crook and Susan E. Neimic

Inherent Skills in Adult Learners **48**
Richard Silvia and Kathy Peno

Mentorship Is Joy: Cultivating Resistance, Belonging, and Leadership in Higher Education **56**
Torialyn Draper-Crook

From Burnout to Belonging: Reclaiming Joy in A Precarious Academe **63**
Kathleen Romero and Ane Turner Johnson

The Joy Blueprint: Mentorship and Coaching Reimagined **73**
Kadijah Sistrunk, M.Ed., MPA, SHRM-CP

Table of Contents

Opening the Door, But Not Entering: Adult College Students Who Apply, But Do Not Enroll **82**
Juliette Punchello

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) in Practice: Supporting Adult Learners in Asynchronous Online Learning **87**
Minghan Gao and Xi Lin

When Joy Becomes Resistance: Mindfulness and Neuroscience as Pathways to Resilience in Higher Education **101**
Yolanda Loften Sims

Cultivating Collegial Joy: Faculty Growth and Support in a Simple Hallway **107**
Modupe Soremi, Connie Hudspeth, Grace Nasnas, Tamara Steffy, M.Ed, and E. Julie Edstrom

Uncovering Resilience: Encountering Students in Higher Education with Mental Health Concerns **117**
Shantreirra Monroe

Joy Through Reflection: Using ePortfolios and Storytelling to Foster Leadership Identity in Adult Learners **127**
Jennifer Enderlin

Learned Leadership: Social and Ethical Components of Sorority Leadership Development **135**
Olivia Rowe and Jeremy Schwehm

"Place Matters:" Adult Educators' Roles with Local Leaders in Transforming Mineral-Rich Communities in Ghana **145**
Isaac Kofi Biney

50 Years Later: The Origins of AHEA **165**
Xenia Coulter and Alan Mandell

The Adult Learner: Core Ideas Animating AHEA for 50 Years

Xenia Coulter and Alan Mandell

Abstract

We identify eight premises underlying the progressive practices of adult learning that stimulated the development 50 years ago of AHEA, the Adult Higher Education Alliance. After presenting them to participants at the 2026 AHEA conference, we found that these premises still shape the teaching aspirations of adult educators today, although translation into practice is still not easy. As higher education today faces various crises, it is worrisome that andragogy may be further endangered by pedagogical solutions offered by new technologies even though experience and logic indicate that andragogy promotes human growth and development in ways that job training and submissive pedagogical approaches do not.

Keywords*:* Adult learners, andragogy, human development, higher education

As we met with current members of the Adult Higher Education Alliance (AHEA) during the 50th year anniversary, we saw this moment as an opportunity to remind ourselves of the core concepts that have long served as the underlying foundation of the organization. We identified eight such core ideas that excited members of the original Alliance, stimulated experimentation in teaching adult students in higher education, and generated questions, issues, and challenges that animated our yearly conferences both in formal presentations and informal conversations throughout our meetings. To what extent, we wondered, are these ideas still cogent today? How, indeed, have our adult students fared as learners in higher education institutions? What problems have been solved; what new problems have emerged?

Underlying Premises of Andragogy

All these questions, and others, arose as we sought to list the most important ideas we, as adult educators, have held dear.

1) Adults are competent learners.

In the 1970's, when the Alliance was first formed, most traditional faculty commonly understood that only the young could truly benefit from higher education. Their minds were open, clear, and capable of handling intricate and abstract intellectual material. For these educators, adult students did not, as a rule, have much scholarly potential. The faculty taught night classes for adults as a duty and did not welcome them in their regular day courses. For the most part, these faculty really believed that you could not "teach old dogs new tricks," and were unaware that Thorndike, Lindeman, Houle, Tough, and Knowles, each in different ways, thoroughly challenged that stereotype. When the Alliance was created to support higher education institutions that sought to

serve adult learners, many faculty members new to those institutions, similarly uninformed, were at first surprised and then excited to find that age was *not at all* a hindrance for those adult learners hungry for an education that would lead them to a higher degree. Indeed, the growing consensus was that, if anything, adults with considerable life experience behind them were more capable of thoughtful reflection and serious curiosity about the material they studied than traditional students (with quite different preoccupations).

2) Life experience and disciplinary literacy are equally important as sources of inquiry.

In most conventional academic settings, disciplinary literacy was taken to be the ideal; life experience was understood as a weaker ground of understanding. This was the assumed hierarchy. The academy has always championed the knowledge that it holds sacred; that is, knowledge of the academic disciplines. This is viewed as the prized knowledge that institutions of higher learning offer. Experiential learning was always taken as lesser, secondary, surely thinner. The experiential realm might have some value to the individual, but it had little or no place within the walls of the academy. Those drawn to the Alliance were committed to disrupting this hierarchy and rethinking and elevating the value of "experiential learning." And what they found was that an individual's life experiences, whether from the past or the present, were sources of rich, meaningful, and substantive learning not only on their own, but as they related to disciplinary studies in the humanities, social sciences, the hard sciences, and numerous applied content areas.

3) The purported "need" by adults for relevance actually underlies all knowledge quests.

This often-cited demand by adult learners for practical content or relevance may still be somewhat of a hangover from the original negative stereotype of adult learners, a special condition they need that is not ordinarily associated with the disciplinary literacy of most university faculty. The joy of learning for its own sake is highly valued in higher education; following one's curiosity wherever it takes you is a stereotype in its own right for the classical "ivory tower," which is supposed to be divorced from the practical concerns of everyday life. In truth, a demand for relevance or a desire for practicality is not an unreasonable expectation, since, as John Dewey pointed out more than 100 years ago, they are really the initial impetus and at the core of any serious inquiry. Adult learners are simply reminding teachers that questions of practicality and relevance are what justify the trajectory of human inquiry and should not be forgotten just because the inquiry becomes complex and detailed.

4) The adult learner and the professor are equal-status collaborators.

The professor/the institution was deemed to be the holder of all that is known; the academy was the domain of the professor, of those who were sophisticated and learned and held knowledge. Professors were deemed unquestioned experts in their fields. Those drawn to the Alliance were committed to questioning the teacher-student, the expert-novice hierarchy. The role and the

hubris of the professor had to be rethought, as did the supposed ignorance of the student; professors had to be questioned; student knowledge/skills/understanding had to be uncovered, recognized, and honored. The dialogical ideal becomes a new norm to be realized. Instead of teaching, *mentoring*, for example, becomes a topic of theoretical and practical interest and value.

5) Adult learners should be allowed agency and self-direction.

While college teachers, even if they need to be prompted, have no difficulty explaining the everyday importance of what they know and find exciting, they have more difficulty knowing how to let their adult students start with knowledge or questions that the student wants to pursue. In a way, it's as simple as not greeting a student with – "given your background (or objectives, goals, desires, etc.), this is what you need to learn," but rather – "given your background (etc.), what are you most eager to learn?" It turns out that adult learners, after getting over the shock of being invited to share their own concerns and needs, have no difficulty in identifying questions that address their concerns or missing information that seems critical in their work, whether it has to do with their vocation or occupation, or to situations in their families or society as a whole. They wonder, worry, and speculate about any number of things that they have experienced or hope to undertake. It takes a broad base of scholarly knowledge, some imagination, and solid resourcefulness for a faculty member to help a student figure out what academic studies they may find useful that address one or more of their objectives or concerns. However, the skills the faculty need as well as the skills a student must acquire to take responsibility for their inquiries, are all learnable, and with time, those skills become stronger both for the faculty and the student. Helping adult learners take ownership of their own education turns out to be one of the most interesting ventures available for higher education faculty. There may be no more exciting moment for a faculty advisor than the day the adult learner enters her office describing some knowledge that he needs, the resources he's noted that are available to study, and experts in the field who he's spoken with who may be able to help.

6) The diversity of adult learners demands individualized study.

It is said that as we age, humans become increasingly diverse, a reality that faculty face when their goal is to help students achieve agency and self-direction. How can we possibly meet the unique needs of each student, they might ask. Shouldn't we look for what students have in common? And don't we – as a matter of fairness – want our students to all have access to the same learning experiences? And, too, as a matter of convenience for the faculty -- even for institutions of higher learning -- standardization seems like a godsend. But if the purpose of higher education is to strengthen student curiosity, inquiry skills, and love for lifelong learning, we must recognize the breadth and depth of human diversity in order to keep our students from becoming passive receptors of information of key interest to the faculty but not the learner. This requirement may seem to be the greatest challenge for many faculty forced to address the diversity of student interests and objectives by allowing students to explore their discipline rather

than to accept what they have so carefully prepared for them to ingest. It may seem a significant amount of work to guide a class of students in multiple directions within a particular discipline. But don't forget the upside: to the extent that students become skilled at being their own educational agents, they don't need a detailed map from faculty. All that the teacher must do is to be ready to point them in the right direction and then let *them* do all the work on preparing maps that work for them. Instead of treading over the same familiar ground again and again, faculty will be surprised to see how transforming and stimulating it can be to see just how many different ways their field holds relevance and direction for others.

7) Andragogy – not pedagogy – is the appropriate form of education for adults.

In all, Alliance colleagues imagined and fought for a new form of education for adult students in higher education to replace what we all knew as "pedagogy." Championed by Malcolm S. Knowles, often considered its American founder, Andragogy was variously defined as a way of teaching adults, a form of adult learning, and/or a theory of education. It has stimulated 50 years of research on how adult lives, experiences, developmental needs, interests, personal/professional realities, and questions shape the role of the teacher, the content of what an adult student learns, as well as the ways in which higher-level inquiry by adult students is conducted. Knowles' 1973 volume, *The Adult Learner: A Neglected Species,* raised deep questions about the nature of education that inspired members of the Alliance to feel strongly that they were entering fresh territory. As they engaged in radically rethinking who our students are and what kinds of teaching, learning, and support we should offer, the underlying question was always: How can this "neglected" group of students gain access to the kinds of learning environments that they deserve and that society needs?

8) With andragogy, traditional assessments clearly require reconsideration.

Of course, as educators, we were not allowed to overlook the significant role of the professoriate in judging, evaluating, and assessing student learning outcomes. With pedagogy, teachers knew exactly what learning outcomes were to be expected; with andragogy, however – with student self-direction – outcomes were varied and often not fully established until the end of the inquiry. Those drawn to Alliance were committed to rethinking our assessment assumptions and processes, the taken-for-granted criteria we were expected to use, and the very value of our assessment activities. In doing so, both teachers and students were often engaged in practicing new ways of reflecting on and making sense of what is and can be learned and experimenting with new forms of assessment. New approaches that were tried included the submission of individualized narrative evaluations with no letter grades, scaffolding such that all that was needed in the end was a pass (or fail), or no grading at all. In many ways, this rather ordinary final step in the learning process became one of the most difficult challenges in the education of our adult learners and in preserving the practice of andragogy.

Open Discussion

The discussion that followed suggested that the battle for adult learning has not yet been won. Department and program realities such as decisions about fiscal priorities, have often made adult-focused programs vulnerable and subject to neglect. Still, and most heartening, those who spoke emphasized the extent to which they continue to embrace many if not all of the eight premises that we had identified. Many also described their ongoing efforts as faculty and teachers to keep them alive for their students. Of particular interest to many, were the opportunities and challenges that are offered today by technological advances that were not available 50 years ago. Access to the internet and all its resources, remote learning with multiple courses available online, and most recently, the development of artificial intelligence (AI) are now front and center when considering how to create courses that meet diverse adult student needs. Overall, in the short time we had available for this discussion, we found muted optimism for the future of the adult learner in higher education – at least in the form of andragogy.

Our Thoughts

To our minds, higher education institutions, which for the most part have been understood and practiced largely in terms of pedagogy, are today at a turning point. The idea that emerging adults could – and should – set aside four years of their lives tin order to engage in higher learning while also growing into full adulthood is increasingly inappropriate in today's world. Yet, this expectation still shapes the mission and structure of most higher education institutions. Many faculty are still animated by the concept of an "ivory tower" where people gather to explore, expand, and create new knowledge, while at the same time society as a whole sees colleges and universities as factories designed to prepare students for modern-day employment.

The entry of adults into the world of higher education was one of the various global changes in the modern world that served to expose this contradiction. Even more importantly, the adult learner also exposed the importance of yet another educational aspiration, usually regarded only as an incidental, albeit positive, byproduct – individual intellectual, social, and emotional development. A pedagogical approach to learning may be appropriate in an ivory tower or for job training, but andragogy – or what Knowles (1973, pp .17-28) referred to as "organismic" learning, or what John Dewey called progressive education, is the very underpinning of personal growth.

Can our current colleges and universities be reconfigured to meet that need?

It is troubling to realize the extent to which so many of the institutions that sought to build programs around andragogical ideals have over the past 50 years, faded away or closed down. Others have continued to survive and, in some cases, have even grown stronger by embracing the world of online or remote education. While online programs clearly solve the access issue that was so important 50 years ago for the adult student (and stimulated many

individualized tutorial programs at that time such as at Goddard or Empire State College), internet-based courses do not automatically result in individualization or student self-direction. Also potentially lost with technology-supported courses – especially with the advent of AI – is the teacher/student personal relationship that so many educators identify as being at the heart of developmental education (see, e.g., Daloz, 2009; Herman & Mandell, 2004; Minnich, 2005; Noddings, 2013; Taylor et al, 2000).

As higher education is pushed to reinvent itself, is it willing to grapple with the highly diverse and dynamic demands of personal development? Can our higher education institutions embrace, or even just accept, the unpredictable outcomes of an education that values each individual's growth? Or, as it has so far, will it continue to see andragogy as too inefficient for any systematic form of education to support? To the extent that technology, rather than human labor, is seen as the only hopeful way forward, we find it hard to be optimistic – not so much about the adult learner who has other options (see, e.g., Kett, 1994) – but about the future of andragogy itself.

References

Daloz, L.A. (2009). *Mentor: Guiding the journey of adult learners*. Jossey-Bass.

Herman, L. & Mandell, A. (2004). *From teaching to mentoring: Principle and practice, dialogue and life in adult education*. RoutledgeFalmer.

Kett, J.F. (1994). *The pursuit of knowledge under difficulties: From self-improvement to adult education in America, 1750-1990*. Stanford University Press.

Knowles, M. (1973). *The adult learner: A neglected species*. Gulf.

Minnich, C. (2005). *Transforming knowledge*. Temple University Press.

Noddings, N. (2013). *Education and democracy in the 21st century*. Teachers College.

Taylor, K., Marienau, C., & Fiddler, M. (2000). *Developing adult learners*. Jossey-Bass.

Xenia Coulter is Professor Emeritus at SUNY Empire State University with a Ph.D. in Psychology from Princeton University. A recipient of various teaching awards, she has also published and presented, often with her colleague, Alan Mandell, on issues of adult learning, teaching, and mentoring, higher education, prior learning assessment, and the philosophy of education. Her more recent publications, include their edited volume, *Adult Educators on Dewey's Experience and Education* (2018), and a chapter in Avila, Rud, Waks, & Ring, *The Contemporary Relevance of John Dewey's Theories on Teaching and Learning* (2022).

Alan Mandell is Professor Emeritus at SUNY Empire State University (ESU) and SUNY Distinguished Service Professor. For decades, he served as mentor, administrator, and faculty in the Social Sciences. With Lee Herman he has written about mentoring; with Elana Michelson, about experiential learning, and with Xenia Coulter, about adult learning. Recognition includes the Sullivan Award for Leadership, the SUNY Chancellor's award for Excellence in Teaching, and for Professional Services, the ESU Award in Mentoring, the Turben Chair in Adult Learning and the Morris T. Keeton Award (CAEL).

Finding Fresh Perspectives: A Practical Guide to Empathy Interviewing in Adult and Higher Education

Robert Gondola

Abstract

Empathy is regularly cited as effective leadership (Zivkovic, 2022), or human trait, though how might empathy be used in decision-making in adult and higher education? This paper introduces Empathy Interviews as a practical, qualitative methodology, which centers participant voice and experience in organizational (and decision-maker) learning. Drawing on traditions of human-centered design (IDEO, 2015) and recognition of the agency and power students inherently have (Yosso, 2005), the paper outlines a step-by-step approach to designing, conducting, and using Empathy Interviews in educational, training, or nonprofit settings.

Using an applied example from a nonprofit educational organization serving historically underserved students in the northeast United States, the paper demonstrates how this method can surface hidden insights and strengthen organizations (and in their service of adult learners). In addition to the method's procedures, implications and considerations are offered for educators, administrators, and/or practitioners seeking to bring empathy-driven inquiry into their leadership and practice.

Keywords: *empathy interviews, qualitative methods, adult education, participant voice*

Reframing Our Practice(s)

Introducing Empathy Interviews

At our most recent AHEA Annual Conference, a small group of members gathered for a presentation on empathy interviewing. One thoughtful listener inquired, "But isn't what you're sharing just how interviews are conducted as a qualitative methodology?" No, because a semi-structured interview has a prescribed interview protocol that the interviewer drives, and while it may allow space for follow-up questions, an Empathy Interview is responsive to the needs and priorities of the person being interviewed.

Empathy is increasingly recognized as a foundation for meaningful leadership, connection to others, as well as a means for institutional growth (Meechan et al., 2022). In adult and higher education contexts, leaders are often tasked with making decisions that affect diverse populations whose experiences are not always fully visible within formal information systems. While surveys, metrics, and outcome reporting provide important insights, these sources may not capture the depth of lived experience that may shape how individuals engage with institutions

(West et al., 2020). They may not fully capture the experience and perspectives that individuals bring.

Empathy Interviews offer a practical method for addressing this gap. Rooted in human-centered design and interpretivist traditions, this approach creates space for participants to share narrative, emotion, and their own meaning-making (Bettez, 2015) in ways that extend beyond traditionally structured data collection. When used intentionally, Empathy Interviews can help educators and administrators better understand the very communities they serve, which in turn has the potential to strengthen both relationships and decision-making within organizations.

Empathy Interviewing is a unique methodological approach for adult and higher education practitioners to adopt and use in their own institutional settings. In lieu of focusing primarily on theory, the paper's goal is to provide a clear, actionable framework for implementing the Empathy Interview method in these diverse settings.

Conceptual and Methodological Framing

Empathy Interviews draw from multiple traditions, including human-centered design (IDEO, 2015), participatory inquiry (Kemmis, 2006), and counter-storytelling (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Across this scholarship, a common throughline emerged: Recognition that individuals are the most expert of their own experiences; whereas meaningful understanding comes through the practice of listening. And doing.

Unlike conventional qualitative interviews, which may prioritize efficiency or structured questioning, Empathy Interviews emphasize presence, curiosity, and minimal interruption (Särkelä & Suoranta, 2020). The interviewer takes on the role of curious investigator, allowing participants to guide where the conversation goes. This shift in stance can be particularly important when working with historically minoritized and/or marginalized populations, whose perspectives are often unseen, filtered, or limited in institutional settings.

While empathy is frequently framed in terms of ethics or equity, it may also be understood as a generative force in organizations. In leadership and organizational research, empathy is understood as the capacity to enter into another person's perspective and emotional world, and to use that understanding to shape more humane, informed, and effective decisions (Boyatzis & McKee, 2005; Goleman et al., 2017). When individuals feel heard, trust develops, relationships deepen, and new possibilities for action may arise. In this way, Empathy Interviews function not only as a data collection method, but also as a relational practice.

Methodological Approach: Designing and Conducting Empathy Interviews

The following section outlines a practical approach to implementing Empathy Interviews in educational and nonprofit settings. While the method is flexible, several components support effective practice. Drawing on my photovoice studies with adult learners (Gondola, 2023; Wang

& Burris, 1997), I also incorporated experience using empathy-based interviewing protocols used by the procedures delineated by Särkelä & Suoranta (2020). These approaches follow.

Designing the Inquiry

Empathy Interviews begin with a clear purpose. Rather than seeking to confirm assumptions, the goal is to explore experience, or perspectives. Guiding questions should be open-ended and invite reflection, such as: "*Can you tell me more about your experience with*…," "*What stands out to you when you think about*…," and "*How would you describe*…" These prompts are intentionally broad in nature, allowing participants to define what is meaningful to them. Participants decide what is important.

These questions are open-ended, narrative-driven, and participant-centered. Listening is the priority, not efficiency. These interviews uncover barriers, motivations, emotions, and meaning. One participant was asked how student success might be better evaluated? One student said, in schools, "We reduce it to paper to make it simpler for [teachers/administrators]; we need to make it simpler for students to show what they can do." An empathy interview is responsive, relational, and centered on listening; whereas a semi-structured interview may be structured, efficient, and follow-up questions are responded to.

Participant Selection

A diverse range of adult learners' perspectives strengthens the inquiry. In practice, this may include students, alumni, staff, and community partners. Including multiple stakeholder groups allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the organization and its impact.

Interview Approach

During the interview, the researcher prioritizes listening over directing. This includes allowing pauses and silence, following the participant's lead, asking follow-up questions that deepen understanding, while minimizing interruption. The goal is not to move quickly, but to create space for participants to fully articulate their experiences.

Procedures

The Empathy Interview began with education on the part of the interviewers. Interviewers received a briefing on Empathy Interviews. It could even be reading this paper. Interview 'Guides' are created, not as scripts, but as guides for the interviewer to use to support their conversation. Before asking prepared questions, the interviewer establishes authentic rapport and models their ability to listen. The person being interviewed is made to feel comfortable. Then, inquiry continues. Questions are asked, but follow up questions show curiosity. Understanding is confirmed. The person being interviewed leaves the conversation, most especially, feeling heard. Conventional practices of consent and institutional protocols are followed.

Researcher Positionality

Empathy Interviewing requires a shift in positionality (Bettez, 2015). The interviewer approaches

the conversation with humility, recognizing that insight emerges through the participant's narrative. This stance can be particularly important for leaders who are accustomed to decision-making roles, as it invites them to listen before acting. The listener is willing to be taught by the learner being interviewed, and the interviewer consciously shifts from perceived-expert (and the power that comes with that) to a co-learner, or just learner.

Example in Practice

In my work with a nonprofit academy serving historically underserved students, Empathy Interviews were used as part of a broader effort to better understand student and partner experiences. Their input was used to inform external efforts. Participants included students, alumni, staff, and community partners, offering multiple perspectives on the organization's role and impact.

These interviews surfaced insights that were not readily visible through traditional data sources. Participants shared narratives of resilience, barriers, and opportunity too, which informed how the organization understood its own work. The process also strengthened relationships, as participants experienced the act of being heard as meaningful in itself.

When conducted, Empathy Interviews informed three key, newly adopted goals for the organization's leadership: 1) Counter narratives and impact storytelling, 2) strengthening partnerships and reputation, and 3) policy, metrics, and legislative strategy. The students' input was immediately incorporated into efforts that would make the organization better.

Data Analysis and Action

Empathy Interviews generate narrative data that must be thoughtfully interpreted. In practice, this often involves identifying themes across interviews and synthesizing insights into a framework that can inform decision-making (Saldaña, 2014). Rather than reducing responses to simple categories, a goal is to preserve the richness of participant voice while identifying patterns that can guide action. In the example above, themes related to storytelling, partnerships, and policy emerged, shaping how the organization approached strategy and communication. Importantly, though, the value of Empathy Interviews lies not only in the data collected, but in how that data is used. When insights are shared with stakeholders and integrated into planning processes, it's a method that serves as a tool for organizational development.

These interviews have the power for organizational change. They may elevate voices missing from institutional decision-making as well as provide key consumer (or adult learner) insights. Furthermore, empathy interviewing can bridge both heart and mind, or the data, that connects leadership and management.

Implications for Adult and Higher Education

For educators and administrators, Empathy Interviews offer a practical approach to centering participant voice in institutional practice. This method can be applied in classrooms, student services, program evaluation, and/or organizational leadership.

By integrating empathy-driven inquiry into their work, practitioners can strengthen relationships with students and communities, inform decision-making with lived experience, and create more responsive and inclusive environments. In this way, empathy is not separate from education, but another dimension of it, bridging understanding and action.

Conclusion

Empathy Interviews provide a flexible and powerful methodology for bringing forward perspectives that are often unseen in formal systems. By creating space for narrative and meaning, this approach allows educators and leaders to better align their work with the experiences of those they serve.

Ultimately, the practice of empathy in research and leadership is not only about understanding—it is about creating conditions where individuals feel heard and supported. In doing so, Empathy Interviews offer both a method and a mindset for advancing learning, equity, and organizational growth. Empathy, then, is understanding people well enough that it changes how you lead.

References

Bettez, S. C. (2015). Navigating the complexity of qualitative research in postmodern contexts:

Assemblage, critical reflexivity, and communion as guides. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, *28*(8), 932-954.

Boyatzis, R., & McKee, A. (2005). *Resonant leadership: Renewing yourself and connecting with others through mindfulness, hope, and compassion*. Harvard Business School Press.

Goleman, D., Boyatzis, R., Davidson, R. J., Druskat, V., & Kohlrieser, G. (2017). Empathy: a primer (building blocks of emotional intelligence book 6). *Florence: More Than Sound*.

Gondola, B. (2023). *Navigating the higher education landscape: Arts-based perspectives by community college students* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Rhode Island).

IDEO. (2015). *The field guide to human-centered design*. IDEO.org.

Kemmis, S. (2006). Participatory action research and the public sphere. *Educational Action Research, 14*(4), 459–476. https://doi.org/10.1080/09650790600975593

Meechan, F., McCann, L., & Cooper, C. (2022). The importance of empathy and compassion in organizations: Why there is so little, and why we need more. In R. Mir & A. Jain (Eds.), *Research handbook on the sociology of organizations* (pp. 145–163). Edward Elgar Publishing.

Saldaña, J. (2014). *Thinking qualitatively: Methods of mind*. SAGE publications.

Särkelä, E., & Suoranta, J. (2020). The method of empathy-based stories as a tool for research and teaching. *The Qualitative Report, 25*(2), 399–415. https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2020.4220

Solórzano, D. G., & Yosso, T. J. (2002). Critical race methodology: Counter-storytelling as an analytical framework for education research. *Qualitative Inquiry, 8*(1), 23–44. https://doi.org/10.1177/107780040200800103

West, D., Luzeckyj, A., Searle, B., Toohey, D., Vanderlelie, J., & Bell, K. R. (2020). Perspectives from the stakeholder: Students' views regarding learning analytics and data collection. *Australasian Journal of Educational Technology*, *36*(6), 72-88.

Wang, C., & Burris, M. A. (1997). Photovoice: Concept, methodology, and use for participatory needs assessment. *Health Education & Behavior, 24*(3), 369–387. https://doi.org/10.1177/109019819702400309

Yosso, T. J. (2005). Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth. *Race Ethnicity and Education, 8*(1), 69–91. https://doi.org/10.1080/1361332052000341006

Zivkovic, S. (2022). Empathy in leadership: How it enhances effectiveness. *Economic and Social Development: Book of Proceedings*, 454–467.

Robert (Bobby) Gondola is the Treasurer of AHEA and serves as Proceedings Editor, is an adjunct professor at the University of Rhode Island and Johnson & Wales University, teaching program evaluation, leadership, and research. A previous college executive, raised $23 million, leading the Northeast's largest community college foundation. He researches student experience and the workforce. He graduated from Salve Regina University, Harvard University, and the University of Rhode Island.

Complex Racial Trauma in Andragogical Spaces: An Assessment of a Trauma-Informed GED Prep Program

Gary Audas Jr.

Abstract

Adult learning environments are populated by individuals who have experienced systemic inequities, discrimination, and trauma associated with race and identity. Complex Racial Trauma (CoRT) disproportionately affects Black students and other people of color (POC), influencing cognition, emotional regulation, and academic engagement. These effects create significant barriers to educational success, particularly in adult basic education contexts such as General Educational Development (GED) programs. This study evaluated whether trauma-informed educational practices embedded at the program level improve academic outcomes for adult learners. Using *ged.com* pretest and posttest data from a Texas-based non-profit program, the analysis applies Cohen's *d* to assess effect size. Findings suggest that trauma-informed approaches correlate with improved academic performance and learner engagement. This research contributes to the limited scholarship on trauma-informed andragogy and provides a framework for adult education programs serving marginalized populations.

Keywords: trauma-informed education, andragogy, complex racial trauma, GED, adult learning

Introduction

The United States faces a persistent adult literacy crisis that affects economic mobility, public health, and social stability. Approximately 21% of adults are illiterate, and more than half function below a sixth-grade level (Craft, 2021). Educational attainment strongly predicts lifetime earnings, and limited literacy contributes to significant economic losses and reduced opportunity (Duncan & Holzer, 2023; Auguste et al., 2009). Low literacy is also associated with poorer health outcomes, including difficulty navigating healthcare systems and managing chronic conditions (Baker et al., 2002; Berkman et al., 2011).

Adult learners entering GED programs often bring complex life experiences shaped by poverty, instability, and trauma. For many POC, these experiences are compounded by exposure to racism and discrimination, which function as chronic stressors with long-term cognitive and emotional effects. Complex Racial Trauma (CoRT) disrupts executive functioning, including memory, attention, and sequencing, all of which are critical for academic success (Cénat, 2022; Saleem et al., 2019).

Despite the prevalence of trauma among adult learners, research on trauma-informed practices in adult education remains limited. Most scholarship focuses on K–12 populations, leaving a gap in understanding how trauma affects adult learners and how programs can respond effectively. This

study evaluated whether trauma-informed practices embedded across a GED program improve academic outcomes for marginalized adult learners.

Complex Racial Trauma and Adult Learning

Complex Racial Trauma refers to the cumulative psychological and physiological effects of exposure to racism across individual, institutional, and historical contexts (Cénat, 2022). Unlike isolated traumatic events, CoRT is continuous and pervasive, shaping individuals' experiences across the lifespan. It includes both direct experiences of discrimination and indirect exposure through observation and historical awareness.

Research informs that trauma can be intergenerational, with historical oppression influencing present-day behaviors, stress responses, and health outcomes (Saleem et al., 2019). Events such as slavery, colonization, and systemic discrimination have enduring impacts that extend beyond individuals to families and communities. These intergenerational effects contribute to the presence of trauma within adult learning environments.

The cognitive effects of trauma are particularly relevant to education. Trauma impairs working memory, attention, and higher-order thinking, limiting a learner's ability to engage in academic tasks (Perry & Szalavitz, 2017; Van der Kolk, 2015). Additionally, CoRT affects self-concept and motivation, often resulting in disengagement and reduced persistence.

Adult learners impacted by CoRT frequently have fractured relationships with formal education. Past experiences of failure, stigmatization, and exclusion contribute to a lack of trust in educational institutions. Addressing these barriers requires instructional approaches that recognize the role of trauma in shaping learning behaviors.

Andragogy and Adult Learners

Andragogy, defined as the art and science of helping adults learn, emphasizes learner-centered instruction and the importance of life experience in shaping learning (Knowles, 1988). Adult learners benefit from collaborative, flexible environments that allow them to draw upon their experiences while developing new skills (Merriam et al., 2007).

In trauma-informed contexts, the role of the educator shifts from authority figure to facilitator. This shift is critical for learners who may have experienced disempowerment in prior educational settings. Trusting relationships between instructors and learners support engagement and persistence, particularly for those affected by trauma (Dods, 2013; Ennis & McCauley, 2002).

Differentiated instruction plays a key role in andragogical practice. By tailoring instruction to individual needs, educators can support learners with varying skill levels and experiences. This flexibility is essential for addressing the diverse challenges faced by adult learners in GED programs.

GED Programs and Structural Barriers

The GED credential provides an alternative pathway for individuals who did not complete high school. However, participation in GED programs is often shaped by structural barriers, including poverty, family responsibilities, substance abuse, and exposure to violence (Dutro, 2019; Meeker et al., 2008).

These challenges are disproportionately experienced by POC due to systemic inequities. Racism and discrimination limit access to quality education and resources, contributing to disparities in educational attainment (Emdin, 2016; McInerney & McKlindon, 2014). As a result, many adult learners enter GED programs with significant academic and social disadvantages.

Educational accomplishment has clear economic implications. Individuals without a high school diploma earn substantially less than those with one, reinforcing cycles of poverty (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2025). GED programs serve as critical intervention points, offering opportunities for upward mobility.

Trauma and Educational Impact

Trauma is defined as an event or series of events that overwhelm an individual's ability to cope and result in lasting adverse effects (SAMHSA, 2019). These effects can manifest cognitively, emotionally, and socially, all of which influence learning.

In educational settings, trauma can impair concentration, memory retention, and task completion. Learners may exhibit anxiety, hypervigilance, or emotional dysregulation, which interfere with academic engagement (Baracz & Buisman-Pijlman, 2017). For adult learners, these challenges are often compounded by external stressors such as employment and family responsibilities.

Complex trauma, characterized by prolonged exposure to harmful experiences, is particularly detrimental. Many adult learners experience trauma as an ongoing condition shaped by socioeconomic and systemic factors. Addressing these realities requires an integrated, trauma-informed approach to education.

Racism and Educational Inequities

Racism operates as both a belief system and a structural force that shapes access to opportunity (American Psychological Association, 2021). Historical forms of oppression have created enduring inequities that continue to affect educational outcomes for POC.

The experiences of Black, Hispanic Americans, as well as American Indians, illustrate the pervasive impact of systemic racism. These groups have faced discrimination through segregation, economic exclusion, and cultural erasure, resulting in disparities in education and socioeconomic outcomes (Dunbar, 2014; Massey & Denton, 1993/1998; Menchaca, 2001; Dunbar, 2014).

These historical and contemporary inequities contribute to the prevalence of CoRT, which affects learners' engagement and success in educational environments. Understanding these dynamics is essential for developing effective educational interventions.

Trauma-Informed Education

Trauma-informed education integrates an understanding of trauma into all aspects of program design and delivery. It emphasizes safety, trust, collaboration, and empowerment (Baker et al., 2002; Dutro & Bien, 2014).

In trauma-informed environments, educators recognize the impact of trauma on behavior and learning. They create structured, supportive settings that reduce stress and promote engagement. Cultural responsiveness is a key component, particularly in programs serving diverse populations, as it validates learners' identities and experiences.

These practices are particularly relevant in adult education, where learners often face complex challenges that extend beyond academic skill deficits. By addressing these challenges, trauma-informed education supports both academic and personal development.

Methodology

This study evaluated a trauma-informed GED program in Texas serving marginalized adult learners. The population includes Black, Hispanic, and American Indian students enrolled between 2017 and 2025.

[G]ed.com pretest and posttest scores were analyzed to assess academic improvement. Cohen's *d* was used to measure effect size, providing insight into the magnitude of change associated with trauma-informed practices. This quantitative approach allows for an assessment of whether these practices contribute to meaningful academic gains.

Discussion

The findings suggest that trauma-informed educational practices are associated with improved academic outcomes for adult learners. By addressing cognitive and emotional barriers, these practices enhance engagement and facilitate learning.

These results underscore the importance of integrating trauma-informed approaches into adult education. Traditional instructional models that do not account for learners' lived experiences may be insufficient for supporting marginalized populations. Trauma-informed practices provide a framework for addressing these challenges in a holistic manner.

The implications extend beyond individual outcomes. By improving educational attainment among marginalized learners, trauma-informed programs contribute to broader efforts to address economic and social inequities.

Conclusion

Adult learners in GED programs often face complex challenges shaped by trauma, systemic inequities, and historical oppression. Complex Racial Trauma significantly impacts cognitive functioning and educational engagement, creating barriers to success.

This study demonstrated that trauma-informed educational practices can improve academic outcomes for adult learners. Embedding these practices at the program level creates environments that support healing, empowerment, and achievement.

Future research should examine long-term outcomes and refine best practices for trauma-informed adult education. Addressing trauma in educational settings is essential for advancing equity and expanding opportunity.

References

American Psychological Association. (2021). *APA's commitment to addressing systemic racism*. Apa.org. https://www.apa.org/about/apa/addressing-racism

Auguste, B., Hancock, B., & Laboissière, M. (2009). The economic cost of the US education gap. In *The McKinsey Quarterly* (pp. 1–5). https://www.mckinsey.com/~/media/McKinsey/Industries/Social%20Sector/Our%20Insights/The%20economic%20cost%20of%20the%20US%20education%20gap/The%20economic%20cost%20of%20the%20US%20education%20gap.pdf

Baker, D. W., Gazmararian, J. A., Williams, M. V., Scott, T., Parker, R. M., Green, D., Ren, J., & Peel, J. (2002). Functional health literacy and the risk of hospital admission among Medicare managed care enrollees. *American Journal of Public Health*, *92*(8), 1278–1283. https://doi.org/10.2105/ajph.92.8.1278

Baracz, S. J., & Buisman-Pijlman, F. T. A. (2017). The effects of early life adversity on the brain: Implications for health and disease. *Frontiers in Neuroscience*, *11*(92).

Berkman, N. D., Sheridan, S. L., Donahue, K. E., Halpern, D. J., & Crotty, K. (2011). Low health literacy and health outcomes: An updated systematic review. *Annals of Internal Medicine*, *155*(2), 97–107. https://doi.org/10.7326/0003-4819-155-2-201107190-00005

BLS. (2025). *Usual weekly earnings of wage and salary workers, second quarter 2025*. https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/wkyeng.pdf?utm

Cénat, J. M. (2022). Complex racial trauma: Evidence, theory, assessment, and treatment. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, *18*(3). https://doi.org/10.1177/17456916221120428

Craft, S. (2021, November 18). *48+ U.S. literacy statistics 2022 - percentage by state*. THINKIMPACT. https://www.thinkimpact.com/literacy-statistics/

Dods, J. (2013). Bringing trauma to school: Shared understandings for educators. *Traumatology*, *19*(3), 224–231.

Duncan, G. J., & Holzer, H. J. (2023, October 17). *Policies that reduce intergenerational poverty*. Brookings. https://www.brookings.edu/articles/policies-that-reduce-intergenerational-poverty/

Dunbar, C. (2014). Native American boarding schools and intergenerational trauma. *Journal of Indigenous Studies*, *8*(2), 45–60.

Dutro, E. (2019). *The vulnerable heart of literacy: Centering trauma as powerful pedagogy*. Teachers College Press.

Dutro, E., & Bien, A. (2014). Listening to the traumatized child: A critical stance toward trauma-informed literacy instruction. *American Educational Research Journal*, *51*(2), 408–439.

Emdin, C. (2016). *For white folks who teach in the hood... and the rest of y'all too: Reality pedagogy and urban education*. Beacon Press.

Ennis, C., & McCauley, M. (2002). Creating urban classroom communities worthy of trust. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, *34*(2), 149–172.

Knowles, M. S. (1988). *The modern practice of adult education: From pedagogy to andragogy*. Cambridge Adult Education.

Massey, D. S., & Denton, N. A. (1993/1998). *American apartheid: Segregation and the making of the underclass*. Harvard University Press.

McInerney, M., & McKlindon, A. (2014). *Unlocking the door to learning: Trauma-informed classrooms*. Education Law Center.

Meeker, K., et al. (2008). GED programs and outcomes. *Journal of Adult Education*, *37*(1), 25–32.

Menchaca, M. (2001). *Recovering history, constructing race: The Indian, Black, and White roots of Mexican Americans*. University of Texas Press.

Merriam, S. B., Caffarella, R. S., & Baumgartner, L. M. (2007). *Learning in adulthood: A comprehensive guide*. Jossey-Bass.Perry, B. D., & Szalavitz, M. (2017). The boy who was raised as a dog (3rd ed.). Basic Books.

Saleem, F. T., English, D., Busby, D., Lambert, S. F., Harrison, A., Stock, M. L., & Gibbons, F. X. (2019). The impact of racism on child and adolescent health. Journal of Clinical Child & Adolescent Psychology, 48(6), 887–907. https://doi.org/10.1080/15374416.2019.1622121

SAMHSA. (2019). Trauma and violence. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. https://www.samhsa.gov

Van der Kolk, B. (2015). *The body keeps the score: Brain, mind, and body in the healing of trauma*. Viking.

Gary Audas Jr. is an educator, researcher, and nonprofit leader whose work focuses on literacy, trauma-informed education, and resilience in adult learning spaces. He holds a Doctor of Education in Literacy, a Master of Education in Curriculum and Development, and a Master of Public Administration from Sam Houston State University. Dr. Audas serves as the Executive Director of Educational Outcomes, a nonprofit organization dedicated to advancing trauma-informed educational practices for marginalized learners worldwide. His academic career includes teaching appointments at Hampton University, Sam Houston State University, and the University of Houston–Clear Lake. He has trained educators internationally, with recent projects in Kenya and Nepal addressing trauma-informed instruction in diverse cultural contexts. His research explores the intersections of complex racial trauma, andragogy, and literacy education, providing models for equitable and effective GED and adult literacy programs.

Joy, Belonging, and Meaning-Making among Post-Traditional Students in Higher Education

Jacob Miltenberger & Brad Wojtiuk

Abstract

This paper looks at the complex topic of joy. Often implied in campus settings, the paper delves into the topic, bringing it to a greater focus. Throughout, it brings into the foray how students make meaning and what theories are applicable in this context, from Schlossberg's Transition theory (1981) to Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory (1991) to Baxter Magolda's Theory of Self-Authorized (2001). It looks at how joy is constructed, found, and the ways in which it takes place. It ends with what has been found so far in scholarship and what scholarship is still needed to further place joy in discussions pertaining to students in college, instead of a "nice" unintended outcome or mood.

Keywords: Belonging, Joy, Post Traditional Students

Introduction

This research paper examines how post-traditional students develop joy in higher education. Joy is defined as a sustained, meaning-making, positive emotional state. It emerges when students feel a sense of belonging, growth, and self-development from positive institutional relationships (Seligman, 2011). This paper uses Mezirow's (1991) Transformative Learning Theory to show that post-traditional students value andragogical methods. These students are often 25 or older. They balance employment, family, and other financial obligations, and sometimes have military connections (American Council on Education, n.d.). Baxter Magolda's Self-Authorship Theory (2001) connects by explaining how students use meaning from prior experiences. This helps them address developmental challenges, which supports their personal growth and joy. Strayhorn's (2019) theory of sense of belonging, Schlossberg's (1981) theory of transitions, and Birger Sait et al. (2022) CECP-TM model all connect in this context. Together, they show how belonging and connection create social conditions for joy as post-traditional students face higher education demands.

Joy Through Transformation

Post-traditional students often experience more than just credential attainment. They undergo profound transformations in identity and meaning making. These students shift their self-purpose and personal growth. Their learning transitions from simple "knowing" to understanding how knowledge is obtained. This results in significant social, emotional, and intellectual growth (Rocks & Lavender, 2018; Wichita State University, n.d.). Research shows post-traditional students frequently reassess prior assumptions about their capabilities and life paths. When

barriers arise, they draw inspiration from families and loved ones. This motivation helps them develop a new identity (Soares, 2013; Vaccaro & Lovell, 2010). For these students, transformation is a constructivist experience. They make meaning and understand knowledge through critical reflection, which shifts their perspective (Pruitt, 2025). A qualitative study indicates that when belonging increases, values and goals shift. This reinforces a student's joy (Villarruel, 2023). Research suggests that engaged post-traditional students experience profound shifts. These shifts can lead to lasting contributions beyond academic achievement. Such findings highlight the holistic development these students experience. This development transcends academic metrics and evokes joy.

Transformation through Transition

Post-traditional students engage in higher education while managing caregiving, military service, work, and re-entry after some students experienced previous unsuccessful attempts in the past. Schlossberg's Transition Theory provides a framework for student affairs professionals with her 4 Ss: situation, self, support, and strategies. These factors shape students' adjustment in their programs (Schlossberg et al., 2022). Counseling Adults in Transition (5th ed., 2022) suggests that transition for post-traditional students must cultivate a sense of belonging. Spaces such as peer mentoring and advising are vital. Adult learners are more likely to experience joy and confidence in these spaces and remain more persistent. Transition should be viewed as a process of self-development, not a deficit. Student affairs professionals have the agency to create positive changes by affirming that post-traditional students contribute value to campus communities.

Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory highlights the value of civil discourse and reflective programming. These experiences can catalyze positive transformation (Mezirow, 1991). Fung's (2017) connected curriculum reinforces this. When students apply connections and knowledge from lived experiences, they can bridge that knowledge to the real world. Uncertain moments can be scaffolded through reflexivity practices. These practices promote critical reflection and self-authorship. Through these processes, joy and belonging emerge, tied to growth and agency. Student affairs practitioners become facilitators in this transformative, holistic learning.

Finding Joy in the Campus Environment: First Starts with Belonging

A sense of belonging is a critical aspect of experiencing joy. As detailed by Strayhorn (2019), a sense of belonging is not only associated with positive outcomes. He asserts that it's a basic need, universal to all, which he builds on Baumeister and Leary (1995), who called it a "fundamental human motivation"(p.497). Strayhorn expanded this view to include that belonging is tied to identity, is dynamic (changes over time), and is a byproduct of mattering (Knuetta and McCarthy, 2020). All of this is to say that the formation of identity is a key component in a student's quest for joy. How that identity formation, though key, can look very different for each student as identity is tied to a multitude of factors such as race, the student's developmental state, and even the spaces in which students engage with.

Identity Formation and Student Development

From the standpoint of development, Robert Kegan (1994) developed the five stages or orders of consciousness to better articulate the stages of development that people (not just students) inhabit and characterized which stage they were currently at. In doing so, Kegan was interested in how a person makes sense of the world and what drives their actions. He believed that at times adults were "subject" to external factors to which controlled their actions, whereas they became more evolved in their development, could then reexamine these past ways of making meaning as an "object" of examination, which he coined "subject/object theory" (p.32). This theory has led to revision depending on the population to which it was applied. One such revision was Baxter Magolda (2007), who simplified the five stages to three (following external formulas, crossroads, and self-authorship). This simplification was valuable as it simplifies a complex phenomenon and was specifically focused on college student development. Though the simplification made an understandable framework, some of her contemporaries criticized her study as missing crucial aspects, namely race, as her study focused primarily on white student development, though it had generalizability to other populations. To view students' development holistically, Pizzolato (2005) noted the role of race in identity formation. She pointed out that using Baxter Magolda's idea of "crossroads" provides a strong premise, though a key difference noted was that students from Latinx backgrounds often had what she termed "provocative moments" which pushed this population to examine their thinking and begin to make meaning at a younger age than their white peers (p.625). This distinction was important as it highlighted a key difference between peer groups around race and identity formation.

The Role of Environment in Joy Construction

A pivotal part of a student's co-construction of joy happens between themselves and their environment. Students must feel safe to continue to develop. They must feel that they are valued and matter, and there is an acknowledgment of their positioning within their environment as noted by Perez (2019) and Pizzolatto (2005) as well as Bronfenbrenner's Socio-Ecological model (1996). Building upon this prior literature, Sagit et al has identified their own missing aspect, community. Sagiv et al. (2022) Civic Partnership Thriving Model (CECP-TM) found that belonging plays within the student experience as they matriculate through the campus environment and strategies and practices used to create what the authors termed, eudaimonic thriving (self-realization, self-competence and purpose), social thriving (bonding with others and creating social capital), and hedonic thriving (positive emotions, relief and life satisfaction). At the center of their model is self-exploration, but what they took into consideration to a greater extent than others are how interconnected other systems are socially and culturally. They found that belonging does not have a linear trajectory or steps such as early models suggested and instead arranged their ideas in a web, all the aspects influencing one another. They added the elements of civic participation and community participation in leading to students being able to thrive socially.

This ability to see the intersections that affect one another prompted others, such as Samura (2016) and Wong (2024), to look more deeply into other aspects. These scholars examined the concept of space. Samura looked at the physical space, while Wong looked at the physical, digital, relational, and structural aspects of campus space. What each noticed was the importance of space and the effect of thoughtful design, access, and ability to plan for both spaces in which students could choose how they interact with the spaces as it was found that there was a need for students to engage as they see fit (individually, in groups, or a combination).

Conclusions and Recommendations

Joy is an important aspect of student success in need of further scholarship. It is not only a fleeting mood but rather an indicator of other important developments around identity, race, space, and environments in students' lives. At present, it is found in higher education environments though often implied rather than explicitly stated. Given this limitation, there is a need for further study on the topic of joy specifically. Based on the research, joy is believed that qualitative methods would yield the best results and help further contextualize the components of what constructs joy. The importance of joy as a concept in reference to the aspects of student life through qualitative methods adds a richer complexity to the record as joy is an abstract concept which would be hard to capture through quantitative methods alone. Further, there are aspects that weren't addressed currently in this manuscript, such as socio-economic status, which could influence belonging and joy, as suggested by Taltwalter et al. (2021), based on equity, access, and ability to feel comfortable in a variety of space settings. Joy is a non-linear dimension of student development that is experienced when students feel a sense of purpose and belonging in their academic life (Strayhorn, 2019; Baxter Magolda, 2009).

References

American Council on Education. (n.d.). *Posttraditional learners*. https://www.acenet.edu/Research-Insights/Pages/Student-Support/PostTraditional-Learners.aspx

Baumeister, R. F., & Leary, M. R. (1995). The need to belong: Desire for interpersonal attachments as a fundamental human motivation. *Psychological Bulletin, 117*(3), 497–529. https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.117.3.497

Baxter Magolda, M. B. (2001). *Making their own way: Narratives for transforming higher education to promote self-development*. Stylus. UW-Madison Libraries

Baxter Magolda, M. B. (2009). The Activity of Meaning Making: A Holistic Perspective on College Student Development. *Journal of College Student Development, 50*(6), 621-639. https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.0.0106

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1996). *The ecology of human development : experiments by nature and design* (1st ed.). Harvard University Press. https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674028845

Fung, D. (2017). *A connected curriculum for higher education*. UCL Press.

Kegan, R. (1994). *In over our heads : the mental demands of modern life*. Harvard University Press.

Knekta, E., Chatzikyriakidou, K., & McCartney, M. (2020). Evaluation of a Questionnaire Measuring University Students' Sense of Belonging to and Involvement in a Biology Department. *CBE life sciences education*, *19*(3), ar27. https://doi.org/10.1187/cbe.19-09-0166

Mezirow, J. (1991). *Transformative dimensions of adult learning*. Jossey-Bass.

National Center for Education Statistics. (2021). *Post-traditional students in higher education: Facts & context.* https://pnpi.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/PostTraditional_Factsheet_Updated_August2021.pdf

Perez, R.J. (2019). Paradigmatic Perspectives and Self-Authorship: Implications for Theory, Research, and Praxis. Journal of College Student Development, 60(1), 70-84. https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2019.0004

Pizzolato, J. E. (2005). Creating crossroads for self authorship: Investigating the provocative moment. Journal of College Student Development, 46(6), 624 641.

Pruitt, K. (2025, April 23). *Transformative teaching.* Alliant International University. https://www.alliant.edu/blog/transformative-teaching

Rocks, E., & Lavender, P. (2018). Exploring transformative journeys through a higher education programme in a further education college. *Education + Training, 60*(6), 584–595. https://oro.open.ac.uk/50533/3/50533.pdf

Sagiv, I. B., Goldner, L., & Carmel, Y. (2022). The civic engagement community participation thriving model: A multi-faceted thriving model to promote socially excluded young adult women. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *13*, 955777. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.955777

Samura, M. (2016). How can residence hall spaces facilitate student belonging? Examining students' experiences to inform campus planning and programs. *Planning for Higher Education*, *44*(4), 90-101.

Seligman, M. E. P. (2011). *Flourish: A visionary new understanding of happiness and well-being*. Free Press.

Schlossberg, N. K. (1981). *A model for analyzing human adaptation to transition*. The Counseling Psychologist, 9 (2), 2–18. https://doi.org/10.1177/001100008100900202

Schlossberg, N. K., Waters, E. B., & Goodman, J. (2022). *Counseling adults in transition: Linking practice with theory* (5th ed.). Springer Publishing Company.

Schreiner, L. A. (2010). The "thriving quotient": A new vision for student success. *About Campus, 15*(2), 2–10. https://doi.org/10.1002/abc.20016

Strayhorn, T. L. (2019). *College students' sense of belonging: A key to educational success for all students* (2nd ed.). Routledge.

Soares, L. (2013). *Post-traditional learners and the transformation of postsecondary education: A manifesto for college leaders.* American Council on Education. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1336743.pdf

Trawalter, S., Hoffman, K., & Palmer, L. (2021). Out of Place: Socioeconomic Status, Use of Public Space, and Belonging in Higher Education. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *120*(1), 131–144. https://doi.org/10.1037/pspi0000248

Vaccaro, A., & Lovell, C. D. (2010). Inspiration from home: Understanding family as key to adult women's self-investment. *Adult Education Quarterly, 60*(2), 161–176. https://doi.org/10.1177/0741713609336111

Villarruel, V. (2023). *Adult learner approach to transformational change* (Doctoral dissertation, Northern Arizona University). Northern Arizona University Open Knowledge Repository. https://openknowledge.nau.edu/6227/1/Villarruel_2023_adult_learner_approach_transformational_change_interpr.pdf

Wichita State University. (n.d.). *Transformative Learning Theory*. https://www.wichita.edu/services/mrc/OIR/Pedagogy/Theories/transformative.php

Wong, B. (2024). Exploring the spatial belonging of students in higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*, *49*(3), 546–558. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2023.2243285

Wyatt, L. G. (2011). Nontraditional student engagement: Increasing adult learner success. *Journal of Continuing Higher Education, 59*(1), 10–20. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ933084.pdf

Jacob Miltenberger is a second-year doctoral student in Interdisciplinary Education at the University of South Florida, as well as an academic administrator for the Clinical Mental Health Counseling and Marriage and Family Therapy programs. Miltenberger's research centers on the topic of belonging on campus, looking at the many factors which affect it in hopes of providing a more inclusive environment for all.

Brad Wojtiuk is a School Certifying Official (SCO) at the Office of Veteran Success (OVS) at the University of South Florida, where he helps student veterans navigate their educational benefits. Wojtiuk is currently pursuing a Ph.D. in Higher Education Administration, driven by his commitment as an Army veteran to support military-connected students.

Inclusive and Accessible Learning: Designing Non-Formal and Hybrid Spaces for Adult Success

Torialyn Draper-Crook and Susan E. Neimic

Abstract

This presentation, given at the Adult Higher Education Alliance Virtual Conference on February 25, 2026, by Torialyn Draper-Crook, Ed.D., and Susan Neimic, Ed.D., focused on the need for inclusive and accessible learning spaces for adult learners that promote success in online, hybrid, and non-formal learning environments. The authors used the Adult Success Ecosystem Model (ASEM) to demonstrate how universal design, digital accessibility, and culturally responsive teaching practices can improve persistence by fostering a sense of belonging in online, hybrid, and in-person educational settings. Adult learner characteristics and key barriers to success were identified. The presenters share effective teaching strategies grounded in the Adult Success Ecosystem Model that strengthen workforce preparation and career readiness. A case study highlighting presentation objectives encouraged participants to apply the tenets of ASEM and their professional practice.

Keywords*:* Universal Design for Learning, culturally responsive teaching, adult learning barriers, digital accessibility, teaching strategies for adult learners, emotional intelligence

Introduction

Dr. Torialyn Draper-Crook is a faculty member in the College of Online and Continuing Education at Southern New Hampshire University, where she also serves as a Global Campus Career Advisor. With over 17 years of experience in higher education, career services, and student development, she is a dedicated advocate for inclusive and equitable learning. Her research interests focus on adult learner persistence, culturally responsive design, and career readiness in online and hybrid environments.

Dr. Neimic is a faculty member in the Department of Doctoral Research at the American College of Education and is affiliated with Walden University's mentorship program. She is a versatile adult educator dedicated to using new technologies and teaching strategies to improve students' sense of belonging, outcomes, and engagement in higher education. Her research interests focus on military-connected students in higher education, mentoring, and inclusive and culturally responsive teaching.

Adult learners, barriers, and challenges

Adult learners represent a growing and diverse population in higher education. According to Chick et al. (2025), adult learners comprise roughly 73% of undergraduate enrollment, including

military-connected, multiethnic, and multilingual learners. Adult learners navigate a complex web of responsibilities that often compete with their educational pursuits. Many manage simultaneous demands related to family obligations, childcare, and full-time or part-time employment, making rigid, time-bound learning structures particularly difficult to sustain. Designing flexible learning options, such as asynchronous coursework, hybrid modalities, and self-paced pathways, is not a convenience but a necessity for this population. Without intentional flexibility built into the structure of learning environments, institutional barriers may compound the personal barriers that adult learners already carry (Chick et al., 2025; Eick, 2025).

Prior educational experiences also shape engagement with new learning opportunities. Military-connected learners, in particular, may have navigated contexts that did not reflect their identity or transition needs. In contrast, others carry histories of academic struggle, discrimination, or exclusion that create hesitation or disengagement. Educators must offer affirming entry points that meet learners where they are (Chick et al., 2025; McClain & Mallary, 2025).

Health and wellness represent another significant dimension of the adult learner experience. Physical health challenges, psychological well-being, and family circumstances can all disrupt consistent participation. Flexible learning options that account for the whole person, not only the student-as-scholar, are essential to supporting persistence and completion (Chick et al., 2025; McClain & Mallary, 2025; Rettig, 2026).

Disability is equally central to this conversation. Instructors must develop awareness of both visible and non-apparent disabilities and take responsibility for designing learning environments that are accessible from the outset. Rather than retrofitting accommodations after barriers are identified, a design-for-all approach ensures that all learners can engage meaningfully with content, instruction, and assessment (McClain & Mallary, 2025). This proactive orientation is foundational to inclusive and accessible learning.

Finally, motivation is not a fixed trait but a dynamic response to relevance and context. Research suggests it increases when learning connects to real-life experiences and career goals (Chick et al., 2025). When the curriculum reflects learners' professional aspirations, engagement deepens, and the perceived value of the experience grows.

Adult Success Ecosystem Model (2026)

The Adult Success Ecosystem Model (Draper-Crook, 2026) offers a comprehensive framework (Keith, 2023) for understanding the interconnected conditions that support adult learner persistence and career readiness. Informed by adult learning theory, Universal Design for Learning (UDL), and culturally responsive pedagogy, the model conceptualizes adult success not as an individual achievement but as the product of layered, mutually reinforcing systems. At its center is a singular, guiding purpose: adult persistence and career readiness. Each surrounding

layer of the model represents a domain of influence that educators, institutions, and practitioners can intentionally cultivate to advance that goal.

The model is organized around four primary layers: Core, Structural, Identity, and Belonging, reflecting the understanding that adult learners bring histories, identities, responsibilities, and aspirations that must be acknowledged at every level of the learning environment. Surrounding the core is the Structural layer, represented by Inclusive Design and Digital Accessibility. This layer encompasses three critical practices: Universal Design for Learning, accessible technology, and clear and flexible structure. These ensure that how content is delivered, assessments are structured, and technology is deployed does not inadvertently exclude learners based on ability, access, or learning difference. Structural supports embedded from the outset benefit all learners (Cast, 2018; McClain & Mallary, 2025).

The Identity layer is represented by Culturally Responsive Practice, which includes valuing lived experience, ensuring diverse representation, and employing an asset-based approach. This layer acknowledges that adult learners hold rich cultural, professional, and personal identities that are resources for learning, not distractions from it. Culturally responsive practice repositions the learner as a knowledgeable contributor to the educational experience and calls on educators to design with, not merely for, the communities they serve (Keith et al., 2023).

The outermost layer, Belonging, encompasses Peer and Professional Guidance and Belonging and Connection. Sustained persistence requires more than accessible content or an affirming curriculum; it requires that learners feel genuinely connected to peers, mentors, and the broader learning community. When adult learners experience meaningful connection and guidance, their motivation and engagement are strengthened (Chick et al., 2025; Eick, 2025).

Taken together, the Adult Success Ecosystem Model gives practitioners and institutional leaders an actionable framework for designing learning environments that are accessible, inclusive, and career-forward, honoring the whole person while keeping persistence and career readiness clearly in view (McClain & Mallary, 2025).

Universal Design for Learning and Accessibility

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles (CAST, 2018) provide a framework for teaching and learning for all students, with the main principles being engagement, representation, and action and expression (McClain & Mallary, 2025). UDL can support all learners by recognizing that each learner is an individual with unique needs and honoring adults lived experiences as an asset that will enhance their learning. Eick (2025) emphasized that all students can succeed when administrative and teaching practices promote equity and accessibility. Teaching strategies must therefore focus on developing digital skills, providing flexible access to activities, coursework, and alternative forms of assessment, and engaging students in learning to improve persistence and promote learning.

Providing digital orientations and resources in multiple languages that build digital skills can help prepare students for success before enrollment (Eick, 2025). Teachers can also support digital literacy and access by providing instructions for accessing course materials on a mobile device, using dark text colors, and using simple spacing for students who require page readers and translators. Course instructors must build trust using communication with their students and provide flexible alternative learning options for adult learners with multiple responsibilities, including project-based learning, portfolios, and differentiated instruction. By adopting a growth mindset, teachers can provide students with clear expectations, consistent feedback, and opportunities for revision that will not only encourage persistence but also foster an inclusive and culturally responsive learning environment.

Dr. Draper-Crook and Dr. Neimic strongly encourage educators to participate in micro-mentoring opportunities to support adult learners in the classroom. The diversity of the adult learning community often merits a one-on-one approach to helping students succeed. Each student has unique circumstances to navigate as they work to achieve their educational goals. A classroom teacher can use small amounts of time to support students by listening and providing creative, flexible solutions that build the confidence needed for success.

Inclusive Design in Practice: Culturally Responsive Approaches

Inclusive design in adult learning begins with a foundational premise: there is no default learner. Adult learners arrive with vastly different backgrounds, abilities, languages, cultural frameworks, and life experiences. Effective design anticipates this variability and creates multiple pathways for engagement, expression, and success, benefiting all learners when diversity is the starting point rather than the exception (CAST, 2028; McClain & Mallary, 2025).

Flexibility is not a logistical accommodation-it is a pedagogical value. Adult learners balance education alongside employment, caregiving, and health challenges. Building structures that offer choice in how content is accessed and in how mastery is demonstrated communicates that the institution sees them as whole people, not just students with deadlines (Chick et al., 2025; Eick, 2025).

An asset-based framing repositions what adult learners bring to the classroom as a strength. Military service, professional experience, caregiving, and cultural knowledge enrich learning for the entire community. When educators actively invite these contributions, they signal that the learner's experience has scholarly and professional value (Keith et al., 2023).

Finally, trust-building communication and micro-mentoring create the relational conditions for inclusive design to take root. Brief, intentional moments of guidance in advising, feedback, or course announcements may seem small. However, for adult learners navigating complex systems with limited time, the difference can be between staying and leaving (Eick, 2025).

Application of ASEM: Career Readiness and Workforce Preparation

Teaching strategies based on ASEM prepare students not only to succeed in the classroom but also for their careers in the workforce (Draper-Crook & Neimic, 2026). UDL and inclusive design principles can help students build their analytical and critical thinking skills, resilience, and motivation, which can lead to promotion and leadership opportunities in the workplace. Furthermore, teaching strategies can include opportunities for students to build their Emotional Intelligence (EQ) skill set, leading to greater self and social awareness, emotional self-regulation, and empathy for others (Mineo, 2025). By developing their EQ, students can prepare for the workforce by learning to think analytically and creatively while maintaining their motivation and flexibility in working with others. These learned traits will foster collaboration and prepare them for leadership roles.

Designing Learning Environments Using ASEM

Dr. Neimic designed a hybrid learning environment using the SUNY Online Course Quality Review Rubric (OSCQR) to ensure accessible and inclusive learning for a diverse adult classroom with students meeting on campus for approximately 50% of the coursework. The course used learning management software for all lessons and included flexible alternative assessments and course activities that were learner-centered and flexible to build confidence and promote success. Dr. Neimic maintained multiple ways to communicate with students and build trust by responding quickly to student concerns and offering micro-mentoring opportunities to offer support, listen to concerns, and provide information for career preparation. Alternative forms of assessment encouraged students to participate in classroom discussions, group activities, and debate issues. This supportive learning environment, based on the ASEM, not only improved persistence and satisfaction measured by anonymous surveys, but also prepared students for success in academia and the workplace through lessons designed to strengthen their technical knowledge and analytical, critical thinking, and EQ skills.

Case Study

Maria's experience is not an outlier. At 34, Maria manages full-time work as a healthcare supervisor, raises two children, and navigates academia as a first-generation college student-all in her second language. Her enrollment in an online Organizational Leadership program represents a genuine investment in her future, yet by week four, structural and pedagogical gaps are quietly threatening her persistence.

Reflection

Maria’s challenges are instructive: none stem from academic failure. She is struggling because the learning environment was not designed to meet her where she is. Discussion board norms were never made explicit, PDF readings offer no flexibility, and the timed midterm privileges a narrow demonstration of knowledge disconnected from how she applies information.

Most significantly, Maria cannot see herself in the curriculum, and her coursework feels disconnected from the career goals that motivated her enrollment. She hesitates to reach out to faculty, and the more urgent crisis is internal: she is beginning to question whether she belongs-a question inclusive design should have answered before she ever had to ask it.

Application for ASEM

Applying UDL principles to Maria's experience begins with how content is delivered and how expectations are communicated. Long PDF readings could be supplemented with audio versions or chunk guides. Discussion board prompts redesigned to connect concepts to professional experience would invite Maria to draw on her work as a healthcare supervisor, transforming a source of confusion into a space of confidence and contribution.

Assessment design is another critical site. Replacing a timed midterm with a portfolio assessment would allow Maria to demonstrate understanding in ways that align with how adult learners process knowledge. Providing a clear rubric, allowing drafts and revision, and offering growth-centered feedback reduces anxiety and increases engagement, not lowered standards, but more accurate measures of learning.

Culturally responsive design addresses the deeper dimensions of Maria's experience. An asset-based approach positions her bilingualism, professional leadership, and first-generation identity as strengths rather than deficits. Faculty who invite diverse perspectives signal that Maria's full identity is welcome, while transparent expectations, low-stakes check-ins, and micro-mentoring moments embedded in feedback can begin to rebuild her sense of belonging.

Implications

Maria's case carries significant implications for practitioners and institutional leaders. Persistence is shaped by whether the environment is designed to support learners whose lives do not conform to traditional academic norms. When adult learners disengage, institutions must ask not what was wrong with the learner, but what was missing from the design.

Second, Maria's experience illustrates that belonging is cultivated or undermined through small design decisions-how a syllabus is written, how feedback is delivered, whether content reflects diverse experiences, and whether faculty communication invites connection. Inclusive design is a sustained practice woven into every layer of the learning environment.

Third, this case affirms the Adult Success Ecosystem Model (Draper-Crook & Neimic, 2026) as a practical guide for practitioners. Maria's challenges span every layer-structural barrier in content delivery, identity-level needs around cultural responsiveness, and belonging-level needs around trust and professional guidance. Sustainable adult learner success requires that all layers be tended to simultaneously. Maria needed a learning environment designed to answer the question of belonging before she ever had to ask it.

Recommendations for Future Research

Institutions and practitioners are encouraged to examine their learning environments-course design, advising practices, and digital platforms-to identify where structural barriers work against the adult learners they serve. Professional development for faculty and advisors should go beyond basic accessibility compliance to include culturally responsive pedagogy, asset-based advising, and the trust-building and micro-mentoring practices central to the model. Future research might examine the long-term impact of universal and inclusive design practices on adult learner persistence, satisfaction, and career outcomes across online, hybrid, and non-formal learning settings. There may also be a need for research centers to voice the needs of adult learning themselves, particularly those from underrepresented and underserved communities, to ensure that frameworks like the Adult Success Ecosystem Model remain responsive to the people they are designed to support. This is a growing area of practice and scholarship, and continued inquiry will strengthen the field's ability to serve adult learners well.

Conclusion

Adult learners represent a diverse population whose experiences, responsibilities, and goals require intentional, inclusive instructional design. The Adult Success Ecosystem Model (Draper-Crook & Neimic, 2026), grounded in universal design principles, provides a framework for culturally responsive, learner-centered practices that promote equitable outcomes. By integrating adult learner characteristics with systemic approaches to reducing barriers, ASEM supports diverse populations across learning environments. For practitioners, this means examining course design, digital platforms, and advising for structural barriers, while expanding professional development to include culturally responsive teaching and trust-building micro-mentoring, essential steps toward creating environments where all adult learners can persist, belong, and succeed.

References

CAST. (2018). Universal design for learning guidelines version 2.2. http://udlguidelines.cast.org

Chick, J. C., Morello, L., & Vance, J. (2025). Universal design for learning as an equity framework: Addressing educational barriers and enablers for diverse non-traditional learners. *Education Sciences*, *15*(9), 1265. https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci15091265

Draper-Crook, T., & Neimic, S. (2026). *Inclusive and Accessible Learning: Designing Non-Formal and Hybrid Spaces for Adult Success* [Canva Slides] Canva. https://canva.link/vl4m6sikgsrb6bl

Eick, J. (2025). Adult education is virtual: A blueprint for equitable and accessible online classes. *COABE Journal*: *The Resource for Adult Education, 14*(1), 54–62.

Keith, H. R., Kinnison, S., Garth-McCullough, R., & Hampton, M. (2023). Putting equity into practice: Culturally responsive teaching and learning. Every Learner Everywhere. https://www.everylearnereverywhere.org/resources/putting-equity-into-practice-culturally-responsive-teaching-and-learning/

McClain, A. L., & Mallary, K. J. (2025). "When we design for adult learners with disabilities, everyone benefits": Adaptable-Inclusive-Motivated (AIM) model for adult educators to include adult learners with disabilities. *Adult Education Quarterly, 75*(4), 269–290. https://doi.org/10.1177/07417136251316259

Mineo, L. (2025, August 29). Why employers want workers with high EQs. *The Harvard Gazette.* https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2025/08/what-is-emotional-intelligence-and-why-is-it-crucial-in-the-workplace/

Rettig, C. (2026). Holistic wellness frameworks in higher education: A systematic review of impact on student well-being and academic outcomes. *Pacific Journal of Health, 9*(1), https://doi.org/10.56031/2576-215x.1118

Susan Neimic Ed.D. earned a doctorate in education, specializing in higher education and adult learning from Walden University, and is a faculty member in the Department of Doctoral Research at the American College of Education. She is a published author dedicated to using new technologies and teaching strategies to improve learning outcomes and engagement. Her interests focus on military-connected students in higher education, mentoring, and inclusive and culturally responsive teaching

Torialyn Draper-Crook, EdD, is a higher education professional and faculty member at Southern New Hampshire University. She earned a doctorate in education with a focus on higher education leadership and management from Walden University. Her experience spans student affairs, academic advising, student success initiatives, mentorship, and higher education administration. A published author, her interests focus on mentoring, student engagement, and strategies that support academic and professional achievement.

Inherent Skills in Adult Learners

Richard Silvia and Kathy Peno

Abstract

Adult learners bring a range of inherent skills to educational environments, including self-direction, prior experience, intrinsic motivation, and problem-solving ability, to name a few. These characteristics, central to adult learning theory and andragogy, are often viewed as foundational to learner success. However, this paper argues that inherent skills alone are insufficient to ensure successful learning outcomes and workplace effectiveness. Drawing on key assumptions of andragogy, this article examines the nature of inherent skills, their importance, and their limitations when not supported by intentional instructional design and facilitation. The discussion concludes by recommending that adult educators must not only recognize these skills but also actively develop and extend them through structured, learner-centered environments.

Keywords: Inherent skills, feedback, practical application, motivation, adult learning

Introduction

The term *inherent skills* commonly refers to the natural, inborn talents and capabilities that a person can utilize innately without specific skill development (Fletcher & Thornton, 2023). While these skills can be further developed, they traditionally are developed differently than professional or technical skills that might be attained in a classroom or workplace setting. These inherent skills can include a number of different attributes and are often referred to as "soft skills."

Inherent skills differ from the traditional "learned" skills that are taught within professional programs, whether in formal educational settings, workplace training, or other settings. These professional skills include the basic abilities required by the workplace to be able to meet the core requirements of the profession. For example, a physician needs to learn how to interview a patient to obtain their medical history. They may have excellent inherent skills of communication and interpersonal skills, but without the requisite professional skills in taking a medical history, they will likely fail at this task. This leads to a central question: which matters more for adult learners- inherent or professional skills?

Adult learners differ from younger learners in many well-documented ways, particularly in the specific inherent skills and dispositions they bring to the learning environment. These can include self-direction, accumulated experience, intrinsic motivation, creativity, emotional intelligence, and a problem-centered orientation to learning (Knowles, 1980). Many of these characteristics or inherent skills form the foundation of adult learning theory and are central to the work of Malcolm Knowles (1980).

Knowles' theory of andragogy emphasizes that adult learners are autonomous individuals who draw upon their experiences and seek learning that is relevant and immediately applicable. His framework identifies six core assumptions about adult learners, including self-concept, experience, readiness to learn, orientation to learning, need to know, and intrinsic motivation (Knowles, 1980). These assumptions highlight the strengths that adult learners bring to educational settings. In this paper, the authors argue that inherent skills provide a strong foundation for an adult's learning, but they may not be enough on their own. Instead, we posit that successful learning requires the interaction of these skills with intentional instructional design, structured support, and opportunities for application.

Inherent Skills in Adult Learners

Adult learners commonly possess inherent skills that shape how they engage with learning (see Table 1 below for a list of potential inherent skills that adult learners may possess). One of the most significant is self-direction, which reflects a shift in self-concept from dependence toward autonomy (Brockett & Hiemstra, 2018; Knowles, 1980). As individuals mature, they increasingly expect to take responsibility for their own learning and to participate in decisions about the learning process. This characteristic is a defining feature of adult learning and distinguishes it from traditional pedagogical approaches.

Another important inherent skill is the ability to draw upon prior experience as a foundation for learning. Adult learners bring diverse personal and professional experiences that influence how they interpret and apply new knowledge (Knowles, 1980). These experiences provide context and meaning, allowing learners to connect new information to what they already know. At the same time, experience must be examined critically to ensure that it supports rather than limits learning.

Intrinsic motivation is also a defining characteristic of adult learners (Miller, 2021). Adults are often driven by internal goals such as career advancement, personal

growth, or the need to solve real-world problems. In addition, adult learners tend to approach learning with a problem-centered orientation, focusing on practical application rather than abstract knowledge (Knowles et al., 2015). Together, these inherent skills create a strong foundation for engagement and participation in learning.

Table 1. Examples of Inherent Skills

Skill	What It Looks Like in the Workplace
Communication	Clearly expresses ideas in meetings, emails, and presentations; adapts message for different audiences and listens actively.

Problem-Solving	Identifies issues, analyzes possible solutions, and implements effective, timely resolutions.
Creativity	Generates new ideas, approaches tasks innovatively, and finds unique solutions to challenges.
Professionalism	Demonstrates reliability, accountability, ethical behavior, and appropriate workplace conduct.
Critical Thinking	Evaluates information objectively, questions assumptions, and makes reasoned decisions.
Resilience	Adapts to setbacks, manages stress, and continues working productively through challenges.
Emotional Intelligence	Recognizes and manages one's emotions while understanding and responding effectively to others'.
Self-Direction	Takes initiative, sets goals, manages time effectively, and works independently without constant supervision.
Interpersonal Skills	Builds positive relationships, communicates respectfully, and navigates workplace interactions effectively.
Teamwork	Collaborates with others, contributes to group goals, and supports team members.
Metacognition	Reflects on one's own thinking and performance to improve learning and decision-making.

Why Inherent Skills Are Important

Inherent skills play a critical role in enhancing engagement and motivation in adult learning environments. When learners are intrinsically motivated and understand the relevance of what they are learning, they are more likely to participate actively and persist through challenges (Bandura, 1977). This level of engagement contributes to deeper learning and more meaningful

outcomes. As a result, instruction that leverages these skills can significantly enhance the effectiveness of adult education.

These skills also support personalized learning experiences. Because adult learners bring diverse backgrounds and perspectives, educators can design instruction that builds on these strengths. This approach allows learning to be tailored to individual needs and contexts, making it more relevant and effective (Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020). Personalized learning environments also increase learner satisfaction and promote sustained engagement.

In addition, inherent skills facilitate the application and transfer of learning. Adult learners' problem-centered orientation encourages them to connect theory to practice and apply knowledge in real-world contexts (Broad & Newstrom, 1992). They also contribute to collaborative learning environments by sharing their experiences and perspectives. These contributions enrich the learning experience for all participants and support collective knowledge building.

Finally, inherent skills may be required as a basis for many of the professional skills required in the workplace. Communication, emotional intelligence, and teamwork skills will be needed in any setting where collaboration within a team is needed to achieve the needed outcomes (Fletcher & Thornton, 2023). Creative thinking and problem solving are frequently utilized in many work environments from healthcare to carpentry. Merely having the professional knowledge and skill set may not be sufficient without additional inherent skills to complement and utilize them effectively.

Why Inherent Skills Are Not Enough

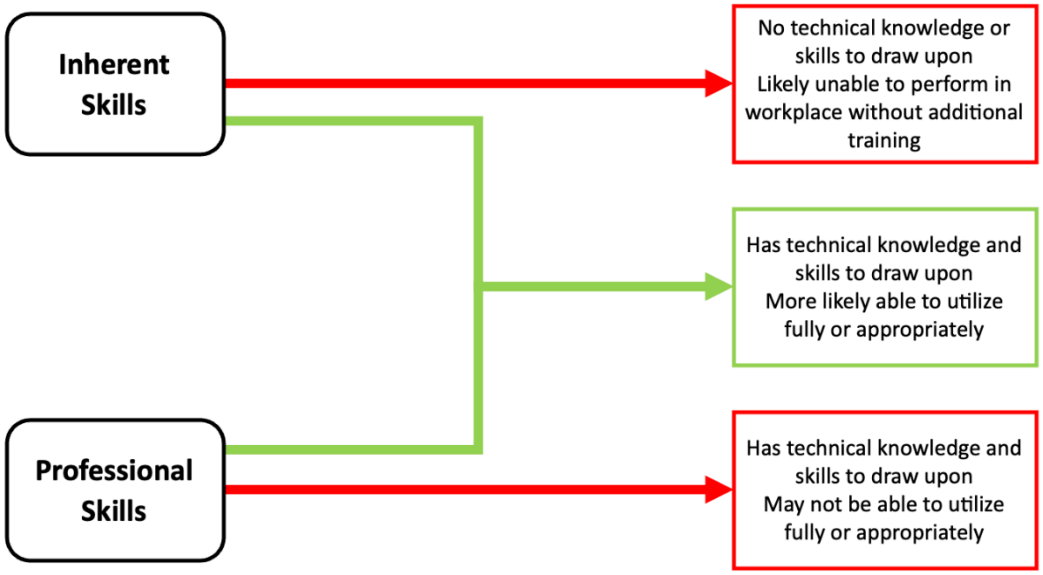
Despite their importance, inherent skills alone are not sufficient to ensure successful learning outcomes (Fletcher & Thornton, 2023). One key limitation is that prior experience can act as both a resource and a barrier. While experience can enhance understanding, it can also reinforce misconceptions or outdated knowledge if not critically examined. Without reflection and feedback, learners may rely on familiar but ineffective approaches.

Another limitation is that self-directed learning is more complex than it initially appears. Although adults tend to be self-directed, effective self-direction requires skills such as goal setting, strategy selection, and self-evaluation (Peno, 2024). These skills are not automatically developed and often require guidance and support (Grow, 1991). Without this support, learners may struggle to manage their learning effectively.

External constraints also play a significant role in limiting adult learner success. Many adult learners balance multiple responsibilities, including work, family, and education (Cross, 1981). These competing demands can reduce the time and energy available for learning. As a result, even highly motivated learners may encounter challenges that inherent skills alone cannot overcome.

As mentioned previously, having strong inherent skills without the required professional knowledge and skills will inhibit effective performance, whether in the classroom or workplace (Gauthier, 2025) (see Figure 1, below). Being a good teammate but not understanding what the team is supposed to be doing, or having strong problem-solving skills but not being able to understand the work-related problem will not allow the learner to achieve the needed outcomes for the workplace. Ideally the learner will possess a combination of both inherent and professional skills, both developed adequately, at their disposal to apply in either a learning or work environment.

Figure 1. Intersection of Inherent and Professional Skills



Developing and Extending Inherent Skills

Because inherent skills are not sufficient on their own, adult educators must focus on developing and extending these abilities. Reflection is a key strategy that allows learners to critically examine their experiences and assumptions. Through reflection, learners can deepen their understanding and make more meaningful connections between prior knowledge and new learning. This process transforms experience into a powerful learning resource (Schon, 1982).

Feedback is another essential component of skill development. Timely and specific feedback helps learners identify areas for improvement and refine their abilities. Without feedback,

learners may not recognize gaps in their understanding or performance. Therefore, feedback plays a critical role in supporting growth and development (Thurlings et al., 2013).

Opportunities for practice and application are also necessary for extending inherent skills. Adult learners must be able to apply their knowledge in authentic contexts to strengthen their abilities and support transfer (Broad & Newstrom, 1992). In addition, structured support, such as scaffolding and mentoring, helps learners move from their current level of competence to higher levels of performance (Vygotsky, 1978). These strategies ensure that inherent skills are actively developed with the help of a more skilled individual.

Conclusion

Inherent skills found more commonly in adult learners, including self-direction, experience, and intrinsic motivation, provide a strong foundation for learning. Along with other inherent skills, these characteristics align closely with the principles of andragogy and contribute to engagement, relevance, and application. However, these skills alone are not sufficient to ensure successful learning outcomes. Without support, learners may struggle to fully realize their potential. Successful adult learning requires the integration of inherent skills with intentional instructional design, structured support, feedback, and opportunities for practice that incorporate both inherent and professional skills together. Adult educators play a critical role in facilitating this process by recognizing and extending the abilities that learners bring to the educational environment. Ultimately, inherent skills represent potential, but it is through guided learning experiences that this potential is transformed into competence and success.

References

Bandura, A. (1977). Self-efficacy: Toward a unifying theory of behavioral change. *Psychological Review,* 2(84) 191-215.

Broad, M., & Newstrom, J. (1992). Transfer of Training: Action packed strategies to ensure high payoff from training investments. Addison-Wesley.

Brockett, R., & Hiemstra, R. (2018). *Self-direction in adult learning: Perspectives on theory, research, and practice*. Routledge.

Cross, K. P. (1981). *Adults as Learners.* Jossey-Bass.

Gauthier, T. (2025). Employer perceptions of soft skills in the workplace. *Career and Technical Education Research,* 50(2), 52-72 https://doi.org/10.5328/cter50.2.52

Grow, G. O. (1991). Teaching learners to be self-directed. *Adult Education Quarterly,* 41(3). 125-149.

Knowles, M. S. (1980). *The modern practice of adult education: From pedagogy to andragogy*. Cambridge Books.

Knowles, M. S., Holton, E. F., & Swanson, R. A. (2015). *The adult learner* (8th ed.). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315816951

Merriam, S. B. & Baumgartner, L. (2020). *Learning in Adulthood: A Comprehensive Guide*. Jossey-Bass.

Miller, M. L. (2021). *Mind, motivation and meaningful learning: Strategies for teaching adult learners.* Association of College & Research Libraries.

Peno, K. (2024). Self-directed learning: Then and now. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, Volume 2024, Issue 184, pp. 14-19. https://doi.org/10.1002/ace.20547

Schon, D. (1982). *The Reflective Practitioner: How professionals think in actio*n. Basic Books.

Thurlings, M. C. G., Vermeulen, M., Bastiaens, T. J., & Stijnen, P. J. J. (2013). Understanding feedback: a learning theory perspective. *Educational Research Review*, 9 , 1-15. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.edurev.2012.11.004

Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in Society: The development of higher psychological processes*.

Harvard University Press.

Richard Silvia, PharmD, MA, FCCP, FAAPP, BCPP is a Professor of Pharmacy Practice at the Massachusetts College of Pharmacy and Health Sciences. He holds Doctor of Pharmacy and Master of Arts in Adult Education degrees from the University of Rhode Island. His research interests include skill development education in health professions and the care of persons living with mental illness provided by pharmacists. He is the current President of AHEA.

Kathy Peno, PhD, is Professor of Adult Education, University of Rhode Island (URI) and Director of the Adult Education Master's Program, the Training and Development Graduate Certificate and the Graduate Certificate of College Teaching. She holds a master's and Ph.D. in Adult Learning and Human Resource Development from the University of Connecticut. Her scholarship focuses on professional learning and skill development from novice to expert emphasizing the role of mentoring.

Mentorship Is Joy:

Cultivating Resistance, Belonging, and Leadership in Higher Education

Torialyn Draper-Crook

Abstract

This presentation was given at the Adult Higher Education Alliance Virtual Conference on February 25, 2026. Torialyn Draper Crook, Ed. D., focused on. This paper argues that mentorship, grounded in joy, care, and cultural humility, constitutes a transformative leadership practice in higher education. Drawing on mentoring theory (Kram, 1985; Ragins & Kram, 2007), ethics of care (Noddings, 2013), belonging scholarship (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Reed et al., 2025), and the author's doctoral research on African American women in higher education leadership (Crook, 2022), the paper reframes mentorship as a strategy for cultivating belonging, interrupting burnout, and developing leadership capacity. Joy is not optional; rather it is essential to sustainable leadership. The paper concludes with a practical framework for joy-centered mentoring and distinguishes mentoring from sponsorship as complementary practices.

Keywords*:* mentorship, joy, belonging, leadership, higher education

Conceptual Framework: Mentorship Beyond Support

Three connected frameworks help to ground this paper's model of mentorship as leadership practice. First, relational leadership theory (Ragins & Kram, 2007) positions leadership not as a fixed individual trait but as a capacity cultivated through sustained relational engagement. Leadership grows when someone affirms potential before it is seen. Second, the ethics of care (Noddings, 2013) establishes that relational care is not secondary to organizational effectiveness but foundational to it. When practiced with intention, care ceases to be just interpersonal and becomes institutional: an enacted vision of what belonging should look like. Third, Baumeister and Leary (1995) established that belonging is a fundamental human motivation whose satisfaction or frustration has far-reaching consequences for well-being and performance. Inclusion invites someone to the table; belonging ensures their voice is recognized once they arrive (Reed et al., 2025). Mentorship is among the most powerful mechanisms for cultivating a sense of belonging.

Why Mentorship Matters Now

Higher education is navigating real strain: escalating burnout, persistent underrepresentation of women and people of color in leadership, and the unevenly distributed burden of emotional labor that falls disproportionately on those most marginalized within institutional structures (Reed et

al., 2025; Tinto, 2012). These are not individual problems with individual solutions. Reed et al. (2025) found that belonging-centered support structures were among the most significant protective factors against burnout for online adjunct faculty. Baumeister and Leary (1995) demonstrated that threats to belonging produce measurable decrements in motivation and well-being. Isolation in professional life is not merely uncomfortable; it is structurally harmful. Mentorship, in this context, is not supplementary to institutional strategy. It is an institutional strategy.

Care as a Counter-Practice

Resistance in institutional life does not always look like protest. Sometimes it looks like care. In systems that consistently prioritize productivity over people, care becomes a counter-practice: a quiet but powerful refusal of dehumanizing institutional logic (Noddings, 2013). Care as counter-practice resists isolation through relational accountability, resists invisibility by bearing witness to the full humanity of those it accompanies, interrupts burnout by creating space for renewal, and challenges exclusion by opening doors that structural barriers routinely close. The mentor who practices care in this way is not simply being kind. Care is not softness. Care is a strategy.

The 2007 film The Great Debaters illustrates this principle vividly. Professor Melvin Tolson mentors young Black students at Wiley College during the 1930s, preparing them not merely to debate but to navigate hostile environments with authority, precision, and dignity. He cultivates resilience and collective confidence under conditions of precise exclusion. That is mentorship as resistance: care as preparation, leadership development in real time. The most impactful mentoring relationships prepare individuals not just to succeed within existing systems but to transform those systems from within (Crook, 2022; Ragins & Kram, 2007).

Leadership Cultivated in Relationship

Developmental mentoring theory affirms that career advancement and psychosocial growth occur most significantly within sustained relational engagement (Ragins & Kram, 2007). This paper identifies three leadership capacities that joy-centered mentoring is particularly well-positioned to develop. First, confidence is not primarily self-belief but the felt sense of having relational backing to take worthwhile institutional risks. Crook (2022) found that mentors who consistently affirmed and advocated for their mentees were instrumental in helping them pursue and sustain leadership roles. Second, voice is the capacity to speak with authority and have one's contributions attributed and valued. Mentors who amplify their mentees' voices perform an act of institutional intervention, challenging structures that make certain voices inaudible. Third, strategic navigation requires access to informal knowledge and networks through which decisions are made. Mentors who share this access generously provide what structure may deny.

Mentorship and Sponsorship: Complementary, Not Interchangeable

Mentorship builds skill, confidence, and professional identity. Sponsorship opens doors and creates access through the active use of positional power on behalf of another (Kram, 1985). Research consistently demonstrates that access, not merely advice, accelerates advancement for those from underrepresented groups (Ragins & Kram, 2007). Crook (2022) found that African American women who experienced both mentoring and active sponsorship demonstrated significantly greater career advancement than those who received mentoring alone. If mentorship cultivates leadership capacity, sponsorship accelerates leadership opportunity. Both are necessary. Neither is sufficient alone.

Joy Is Not Extra: It Is Essential

Joy in higher education is frequently treated as optional. Joy is essential and strategic. Reed et al. (2025) found that relational connection and meaning-centered engagement were among the most significant protective factors for professional sustainability. Joy sustains leadership by replenishing the relational resources that leadership exhausts. The need to belong, which Baumeister and Leary (1995) identified as fundamental to human motivation, is not suspended when people assume leadership roles; rather, it intensifies. Joy strengthens the community by generating social capital that radiates beyond the mentoring pair, building the conditions for belonging at scale. Joy counters burnout: Reed et al. (2025) found that the transition from burnout to belonging required comprehensive, sustained relational investment. Joyful mentorship is exactly that investment. Joy is not soft. Joy is strategy.

A Framework for Joy-Centered Mentoring Practice

Higher education institutions might consider moving beyond ad hoc mentoring toward intentional, joy-centered frameworks. Six principles guide this work. First, institutions could benefit from investing in relational infrastructure by providing protected time, formal recognition, and professional development for mentors. Second, cultural humility could be centered, cultivating mentors' capacity to engage across lines of difference with genuine curiosity and accountability. Third, rather than focusing solely on dyadic mentoring pairs, institutions might consider building communities by investing in peer networks and group mentoring structures that construct belonging at scale (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Fourth, institutions could benefit from practicing both mentorship and sponsorship, creating explicit structures that enable senior leaders to actively advocate for emerging leaders in the rooms where decisions are made (Crook, 2022). Fifth, mentoring work might be named, valued, and resourced, with formal recognition in promotion and review processes. Sixth, institutions could consider evaluating belonging and developing assessment practices that ask not only whether people stayed but also whether they felt genuinely seen, heard, and valued in the process.

Implications for Practice and Policy

The argument advanced in this paper carries direct implications for higher education leaders, faculty developers, department chairs, and institutional policy makers. Joy-centered mentorship is not a peripheral concern; it is a structural one. Institutions that wish to retain talented educators and leaders, particularly those from historically underrepresented groups, must create conditions that foster mentorship at every level of the organization.

For individual practitioners, the first implication is relational intentionality. Mentors who approach their relationships with cultural humility, curiosity, and genuine investment in their mentees' growth produce outcomes that extend well beyond career advancement (Crook, 2022; Noddings, 2013). Practitioners are encouraged to move beyond transactional mentoring, such as offering advice on navigating a promotion process, toward transformational mentoring that affirms identity, builds confidence, and cultivates a sustained sense of belonging (Ragins & Kram, 2007).

For institutional leaders and policy makers, the implications are structural. Formal mentoring programs must be adequately resourced, with protected time, mentor training, and recognition in performance review processes. Institutions should examine whether their existing mentoring structures disproportionately burden faculty and staff from marginalized groups, who are often called upon to provide informal mentoring without formal compensation or credit (Reed et al., 2025). Lastly, assessment practices should be expanded to measure not only retention and promotion rates but also the quality of belonging experienced by those within mentoring relationships, recognizing that sustainability in leadership requires more than advancement; it requires genuine inclusion (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

Recommendations

Based on the evidence and frameworks presented in this paper, the following recommendations are offered for higher education institutions, faculty developers, and individual practitioners seeking to build and sustain joy-centered mentoring cultures.

First, institutions should establish formal, structured mentoring programs with protected time and clear expectations for both mentors and mentees. Ad hoc mentoring disproportionately benefits those who already have access to informal networks. Formalized structures make mentoring accessible to all faculty and staff, particularly those from underrepresented groups (Crook, 2022; Ragins & Kram, 2007).

Second, institutions should invest in mentor development by providing training in cultural humility, active listening, and equity-centered practice. Effective mentoring is a skill set, not simply an outcome of seniority. Ongoing professional development ensures that mentors are equipped to support mentees across lines of difference with genuine curiosity and accountability (Noddings, 2013).

Third, institutions must explicitly recognize and reward mentoring as a form of scholarly and professional service. When mentoring remains invisible in promotion and tenure processes, it is systematically devalued. Formal recognition communicates that relational investment is central to the institution's mission rather than peripheral to it (Reed et al., 2025).

Fourth, institutions should pair mentoring initiatives with intentional sponsorship structures. Senior leaders should be encouraged and supported to actively advocate for emerging leaders in spaces where consequential decisions are made. Sponsorship accelerates opportunity in ways that mentoring alone cannot, particularly for those from historically underrepresented groups (Crook, 2022; Kram, 1985).

Fifth, institutions should develop belonging-centered assessment practices that evaluate not only whether people stay but whether they feel genuinely seen, heard, and valued. Retention data alone does not capture the quality of the professional experience. Assessment tools should invite honest reflection on mentoring relationships, sense of belonging, and alignment between institutional values and lived experience (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Reed et al., 2025).

Conclusion

Mentorship, grounded in joy, care, and belonging, is a transformative leadership practice. It cultivates confidence, voice, and strategic capacity (Kram, 1985; Ragins & Kram, 2007). It builds belonging that moves beyond inclusion toward the genuine valuing of every voice (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Reed et al., 2025). It constitutes a form of institutional resistance that interrupts isolation and challenges exclusion (Noddings, 2013). When paired with intentional sponsorship, it becomes a comprehensive approach to leadership development that is as concerned with the sustainability of leaders as with the advancement of institutions (Crook, 2022).

Joy is not extra. When we mentor with joy, we do not simply support individuals; we also foster a sense of joy. We build institutions worthy of the leaders they seek to develop. The question is not whether higher education can afford to invest in joy-centered mentorship. The question is whether it can afford not to.

References

Baumeister, R. F., & Leary, M. R. (1995). The need to belong: Desire for interpersonal attachments as a fundamental human motivation. *Psychological Bulletin, 117*(3), 497–529.

Crook, T. D. (2026). Mentorship as Joy

Crook, T. D. (2022). *Relationship between mentorship and career advancement: African American women in higher education leadership* (Doctoral dissertation, Walden University). Walden Dissertations and Doctoral Studies.

Kram, K. E. (1985). *Mentoring at work: Developmental relationships in organizational life.* Scott, Foresman.

Noddings, N. (2013). *Caring: A relational approach to ethics and moral education* (2nd ed.). University of California Press.

Ragins, B. R., & Kram, K. E. (Eds.). (2007). *The handbook of mentoring at work: Theory, research, and practice.* Sage Publications.

Reed, R., Carriere, J., Pipoly, L., & Bennett, A. (2025). From burnout to belonging: Comprehensive support structures for online adjunct faculty. *Online Learning Journal, 29*(3), 103–129.

Tinto, V. (2012). *Completing college: Rethinking institutional action.* University of Chicago Press.

Dr. Torialyn Draper-Crook is a Career Advisor and Adjunct Faculty member at the College of Online and Continuing Education at Southern New Hampshire University, where she has served for more than 18 years. Her doctoral research examined mentorship and career advancement among African American women in higher education leadership. That work deepened a central conviction: mentorship is not supplementary to leadership development. It is one of its most powerful engines.

From Burnout to Belonging: Reclaiming Joy in A Precarious Academe

Kathleen Romero and Ane Turner Johnson

Abstract

Faculty burnout remains a persistent challenge in higher education, disproportionately impacting women in contingent roles. Although institutional success relies heavily on their contributions, women contingent faculty are often marginalized within the very systems that enable others to thrive. Using heuristic inquiry, this study explored the lived experiences of women contingent faculty who experienced burnout at a striving university. The findings revealed a lack of recognition, inadequate rewards, and a diminished sense of belonging. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of the structural dynamics that perpetuate burnout within higher education while offering practical recommendations for faculty and institutional leaders to foster more inclusive and supportive working environments.

Keywords: burnout, Carnegie Classification, contingent faculty, gender, Heuristic Inquiry

From Burnout to Belonging: Reclaiming Joy in A Precarious Academe

Faculty burnout is rampant in higher education (Lackritz, 2004) and appears to impact women more than men (Artz et al., 2022). Contingent faculty play a vital role in the success of higher education, but they are undervalued and inadequately rewarded to the level that acknowledges their true worth as educators. This population often wrestles with economic insecurity, lacks access to affordable healthcare, and many are contemplating leaving academia all together (American Federation of Teachers, 2023). This article shares the experiences of women contingent faculty who experienced burnout while at a striving university, examining the implications of their working conditions and the subsequent impact on their careers during the pursuit of prestige. Elevating the burnout experiences of women contingent faculty will assist with understanding the challenges that remain for this population, while identifying practical ways in which they can take control over the trajectory of their careers. In doing so, this work considers how reclaiming joy as a form of agency can serve as a pathway for contingent faculty navigating burnout within striving institutions. Grounded in equity, purposeful contribution, collective liberation, joy encompasses a spiritual dimension that emerges from knowing and feeling what matters most (King & Defoy, 2020). Further, this serves as an opportunity for leaders at striving institutions to shift their perspective of contingent faculty and identify meaningful ways to integrate and support them within the academic community.

The Undervalued Majority

Do we truly understand what it means to be an adjunct before entering into the profession, and once in the role, what keeps us there? Contingent faculty are major contributors to the success of

higher education and account for 70% of non-tenure track faculty (American Association of University Professors, n.d.) and women represent the majority of this population (Schneider & Bichsel, 2024). Yet they frequently carry heavy workloads, work in disconnected environments, and struggle with self-worth (Kezar & Sam, 2013). Recent actions at Stanford and the College of Charleston further reinforced the notion that adjuncts and non-tenure track faculty are treated as expendable and dehumanized, which undermines their aspirations of being valued and accepted within the academic hierarchy (Warner, 2024). It is no wonder that many are contemplating leaving the field altogether.

Insult to Injury: Burnout in the Undervalued Majority

Higher education bridges the gap between human capital and labor demands while simultaneously improving the quality of life for those who attend (Trinh, 2023). However, is this at the expense of the same human resources who contribute to the success of the institution? Organizations contribute to burnout when employees perceive a lack of support and control, unclear employment expectations, and an imbalance between work and rewards (Edú-Valsania, 2022). Burnout presents as persistent exhaustion, cynicism, self-perceived ineffectiveness, and nonachievement (Maslach & Leiter, 2016), which results from ongoing and unmanaged stress (World Health Organization, 2019). As stated, there is evidence that suggests women experience burnout at greater rates than men (Artz et al., 2022), which compounds the pressure that women contingent faculty may face while trying to navigate and excel in their careers at a striving institution.

A Passion for the Inquiry

It is important to acknowledge that this research stems not only from curiosity but from Katie's personal experience with burnout. As paradoxical as it may seem, burnout marked the beginning of a transformation, prompting a career shift, entry into adjunct teaching, pursuit of a doctorate, and a reclaiming of her professional trajectory. Through this journey, she came to understand burnout not as an individual failure but as a condition sustained within organizations that fail to value or recognize the contributions of others. As a new adjunct at a striving university, her initial excitement for professional connection and growth quickly gave way to isolation and limited access to opportunity. Ane supported this process through mentorship, helping to shape and deepen the development of this work.

To explore how other women contingent faculty experienced burnout while at a striving university, we utilized an approach that could deeply understand the condition and provide a space to share my autobiographical connection. Using heuristic inquiry, we explored the experiences of 12 women grappling with burnout and the persistent marginalization that remains in higher education that perpetuates inequities and hinders career advancement. Katie, the first author, was part of this group of women who were navigating feelings of exhaustion, disappointment, and even disillusionment with the institution that we desperately wanted to

belong. Participants shared that they felt unacknowledged and inadequately rewarded within the fragmented culture that they consistently devoted their all. Within these experiences, joy was notably absent but emerged during acts of agency and reclaiming control over professional trajectories. Below, we provide an overview of the research findings, offer recommendations to women contingent faculty navigating institutional striving, and conclude with suggestions for higher education leaders to foster an equitable path within the pursuit to prestige.

Overview of Findings

We had the opportunity to interview 11 women contingent faculty who experienced burnout while at a university that was striving to become a Carnegie Classified level 1 research (R1) institution. Women contingent faculty were interviewed and submitted diary reflections during June 2024 through August 2024, which facilitated a deeper understanding of their experience. There was one thing that was abundantly clear within the findings, these women were devoted to their students and ensuring their academic success during the pursuit to prestige. Their work centered on cultivating educational environments that fostered growth, a sense of belonging, and ensured safety, as these women frequently functioned as allies and mentors to their students. Unfortunately, this commitment, mentorship, and investment in professional success were not reciprocated from the institution during the pursuit to prestige.

As women contingent faculty shared their experiences, it became evident that they felt their work was neither acknowledged or adequately rewarded by the institution. Many expressed that there was limited oversight and guidance in their roles, a lack of communication and collaboration, and an overwhelming sense of alienation from the institution. Even though most women worked for the university for over five years, many lacked a sense of belonging and struggled to find a safe space to share their voices. They opened up about how burnout affected them physically and emotionally yet many of them expressed that they lacked the time and resources to adequately recharge and cope with the condition. Additionally, participants shared that the challenges and barriers they faced as women contingent faculty were, at times, overwhelming.

Recommendations for Our Colleagues

We are powerful and resilient practitioners. While what we suggest may seem unfair, we still need to be and do more as women contingent faculty. However, it is time that we do more for ourselves. It is time to build our networks and seek the mentoring that we have provided to our students from those within the institution. It is time that we become more visible to full-time faculty and foster mentoring relationships (Layou et al., 2022). We cannot assume that the prosperity of our career rests on the priorities of others. We can assure you that it is not.

Growth Through Career Development

Campuses are flourishing with opportunities to grow their staff and students. Sutherland et al. (2015) showed the importance of internal networking within organizations and emphasized gaining experience and knowledge across disciplines assisted with career building. Fernández et al. (2022) underscored the importance of faculty establishing meaningful relationships throughout the organization during institutional striving as these relationships assisted with facilitating change, enhanced collaboration, and created environments that permitted growth for faculty. It is imperative that we do not fall victims to institutional isolation and insufficient support. It is essential that women contingent faculty broaden their network and explore collaborative opportunities within the institution. We need to be willing to learn, engage in professional development, present at professional conferences, and participate on committees. This may also include attending high-profile university events, joining relevant professional associations, and demonstrating a willingness to engage in or conduct research. Further, women contingent faculty should consider establishing a visible presence on social media outlets such as LinkedIn, Twitter, and YouTube as they are valuable tools for professional networking and career advancement opportunities (Escoffery et al., 2018).

Empowerment Through Self-Agency

Contingent faculty are effective practitioners (Vicente, 2018). However, Gonzales (2015) highlighted the competitive nature within striving institutions increased pressure on faculty to prioritize research, which shifted recognition away from those who were engaged with advancing learning outcomes. Gonzales illustrated that when faculty exercised self-agency, they were able to resist overwhelming institutional pressures and regained a sense of control by establishing clear boundaries. Women contingent faculty must have a sense of urgency to assess areas of their careers that they have permitted to be influenced or controlled. Archer (2000) stated, “What we are committed to thus shapes our lives and determines our pay-offs” (p. 54). Our commitment to students and the institution has empowered the success of others. However, it is imperative that we apply the same commitment to establish firm boundaries that protect our well-being and facilitate our success as educators.

Creating Professional Boundaries

There are ways in which women contingent faculty can maintain clear boundaries that do not diminish student success or undermine their roles as instructors. Rockquemore (2015) suggested course materials can be used to clearly define when faculty will respond to emails, hold office hours, and highlight appropriate on-campus resources that can assist students beyond academic instruction. Establishing clear boundaries will enable women contingent faculty to gain control over their professional responsibilities and construct a balanced level of commitment to students. To this end, women contingent faculty must prioritize their career goals and also define specific boundaries with the institution that supports their professional growth. If the institution no longer fosters that growth, it may be time to pursue a more supportive path.

Recommendations for Leaders of a Striving Institution

While women contingent faculty continue to be marginalized and boxed into unsupported and unacknowledged roles, know that burnout does not discriminate and is likely part of a larger culture. We encourage institutional leaders to utilize the pursuit of prestige as an opportunity to both rethink marginalizing practices and foster more targeted training and development opportunities that achieve institutional goals and influence career trajectories (Brown et al., 2021), most particularly for women contingent faculty. Framing this work through a lens of joy invites leaders to design conditions that center care, recognition, and engagement, positioning joy not as an individual feeling but as a structural outcome of equitable and supportive institutional practices. Does it not seem wise to invest in those who are committed to the institution?

Creating a Culture of Community and Career Enrichment

It is important for leaders to be open with contingent faculty about the reality of promotional opportunities within the organization (Feldman & Turnley, 2001). It is imperative that institutional leaders understand that they can promote organizational growth through fostering environments that encourage employees to achieve career goals by increasing their knowledge, strengthening their skills set, and aligning them with opportunities in the organization (Lazarova & Taylor, 2009). As institutional striving prioritizes research related activities, it is imperative that higher education leaders do not lose sight of those who contribute to the educational success of the institution. Fair leadership can promote a supportive environment and ensure adequate resources for those involved with teaching which helps foster a sense of purpose and engagement, which in turn promotes a sense of community among employees (Christensen et al., 2021). Such environments also create space for joy in academic work where individuals feel valued, connected, and energized by their contributions, reinforcing both well-being and sustained commitment to the institution.

Bridging Research and Teaching Through Equity

As striving institutions focus their efforts on the prioritization of research, institutional leaders must place equity at the forefront of research initiatives. Zerquera (2023) offered a framework that promotes equitable and inclusive research, urging striving institutions to adopt reflective research practices by considering who is prioritized within the process and who benefits from the outcomes. Higher education leaders must situate equity and inclusion within institutional striving as women contingent faculty remain marginalized within the pursuit of prestige. Women contingent faculty lacked clarity in their roles, identified a void in belonging, and were unacknowledged for their work. However, university leaders can integrate teaching into institutional strategic goals by prioritizing it within rewards systems, resource allocation, and organizational support (Fernández et al., 2022). Centering equity in these ways can also cultivate

conditions for joy, where meaningful recognition and inclusion allow faculty to experience fulfillment and connection in their work.

Expanding the Scope of Excellence

Strategically supporting and rewarding both research and teaching activities during institutional striving can help address the challenges and barriers women contingent faculty faced during the pursuit of prestige. This can be accomplished by supporting the professional development of faculty who are engaged with teaching initiatives within the institution. Boyer (1991) underscored the significant role that educators play in research institutions, arguing that teaching and research should be viewed as complementary rather than mutually exclusive skills. Boyer proposed offering educators creative professional development opportunities that inspire and enhance teaching abilities, provide financial incentives, and create a reward and evaluation system that positions teaching as a critical measure of institutional excellence. By investing in the professional success of women contingent faculty, institutional leaders demonstrate a commitment to ensuring institutional striving does not perpetuate their marginalization but prioritizes equitable access to the benefits and opportunities that are available within the academic community. Such investment can also spark joy in academic work, as faculty experience a renewed sense of purpose in their teaching and professional trajectories.

Conclusion

Women contingent faculty will continue to experience burnout and marginalization unless both individuals and institutions intervene in the conditions that sustain them. This work is not easy, and the challenges are real. At the same time, we encourage women contingent faculty to act with intention by taking strategic steps toward more affirming pathways in which they can see a future and sustain themselves. Within this process, joy can serve as a guiding framework that shapes decision making, relationships, and sustainability in environments that have not always recognized their contributions. There is space within institutional striving to embed joy into everyday practices and structures. We urge higher education leaders to examine how institutional striving may reproduce marginalization and to recognize that joy is not peripheral but a critical indicator of whether success is built on equitable conditions for all faculty or only a few.

References

American Association of University Professors. (n.d.). *Background facts on contingent faculty positions.* https://www.aaup.org/issues/contingency/background-facts

American Federation of Teachers. (2023). *An army of temps. AFT contingent faculty quality of work/life report 2022.* https://s3.documentcloud.org/documents/24087393/contingent_faculty_survey_2022_interactive.pdf

Archer, M. S. (2000). Homo economicus, homo sociologicus and homo sentiens. In M.S. Archer & J.Q.

Tritter (Eds.), *Rational choice theory: Resisting colonization* (1st ed., pp. 36-56). Routledge.

https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203133897

Artz, B., Kaya, I., & Kaya, O. (2022). Gender role perspectives and job burnout. *Review of Economics of the Household*, *20*(2), 447–470. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11150-021-09579-2

Boyer, E. L. (1991). Highlights of the Carnegie Report: The scholarship of teaching from "scholarship reconsidered: Priorities of the professoriate" *College Teaching, (39)*1, 11-13. https://doi.org/10.1080/87567555.1991.10532213

Brown, C., Hooley, T., & Wond, T. (2021). Personal agency and organisational attachment: A career capital perspective. *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling*, *51*(4), 587–602. https://doi.org/10.1080/03069885.2021.1937940

Christensen, M., Dawson, J., & Nielsen, K. (2021). The role of adequate resources, community and supportive leadership in creating engaged academics. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, *18*(5), 2776. ttps://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18052776

Edú-Valsania, S., Laguía, A., & Moriano, J. A. (2022). Burnout: A review of theory and measurement. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, *19*(1780), 1-28. https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph19031780

Escoffery, C., Kenzig, M., Hyden, C., & Hernandez, K. (2018). Capitalizing on social media for career development. *Health Promotion Practice*, *19*(1), 11–15. https://doi.org/10.1177/1524839917734522

Fernández, K. A., Shank, J. H., Klein, C., & Lester, J. (2022). Striving 2.0: Faculty collaboration and advocacy as strategies for overcoming post-striving organizational priorities. *Innovative Higher Education*, *47*(5), 735–754. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10755-022-09599-5

Feldman, D. C., & Turnley, W. H. (2001). A field study of adjunct faculty: The impact of career stage on reactions to non-tenure-track jobs. *Journal of Career Development*, *28*(1), 1–16. https://doi.org/10.1177/089484530102800101

Gonzales, L. (2013). Living in the gray zone: Faculty views on university striving and implications for practice. *Journal of Faculty Development*, *27*(3), 36–43. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1034389

Kezar, A., & Sam, C. (2013). Institutionalizing equitable policies and practices for contingent faculty. *The Journal of Higher Education, 84*(1), 56-87. https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2013.11777278

King, P. E., & Defoy, F. (2020). Joy as a virtue: The means and ends of joy. *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, *48*(4), 308–331. https://doi.org/10.1177/0091647120907994

Lackritz, J. R. (2004). Exploring burnout among university faculty: Incidence, performance, and demographic issues. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, *20*(7), 713–729. https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1016/j.tate.2004.07.002

Layou, K. M., Goering, A. E., James, B. R., Morales, M., Nagy, R., Rosas Alquicira, E. F., & Macdonald, R. H. (2022). Power and potential: Engaging adjunct faculty as leaders and agents of Change. *New Directions for Community Colleges*, *2022*(199), 133–147. https://doi.org/10.1002/cc.20529

Lazarova, M., & Taylor, S. (2009). Boundaryless careers, social capital, and knowledge management: Implications for organizational performance. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, *30*(1), 119–139. https://doi.org/10.1002/job.545

Maslach, C., & Leiter, M. P. (2016). Understanding the burnout experience: Recent research and its implications for psychiatry. *World Psychiatry*, *15*(2), 103–111. https://doi.org/10.1002/wps.20311

Rockquemore, K. A. (2015, November 3). *How to listen less*. Inside Higher Ed. https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2015/11/04/setting-boundaries-when-it-comes-students emotional-disclosures-essay

Schneider, J., & Bichsel, J. (2024). *Representation and pay equity in higher education faculty: A review and call to action*. College and University Professional Association for Human

Resources. https://www.cupahr.org/surveys/research-briefs/representation-and-pay-equity-in-higher-ed-faculty-trends-april-2024/

Sutherland, M., Naidu, G., Seabela, S., & Crosson, S. (2015). The components of career capital and how they are acquired by knowledge workers across different industries. *South African Journal of Business Management*, *46*(4), 1–10. https://doi.org/10.4102/sajbm.v46i4.104

Trinh, N. T. H. (2023). Higher education and its role for national development. A research agenda with bibliometric analysis. *Interchange (Toronto. 1984)*, *54*(2), 125–143. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10780-023-09493-9

Vicente, E. (2017). An exploration of contingent faculty experiences at a private, liberal arts college. *Review of Social Sciences*, *2*(3). https://doi.org/10.18533/rss.v2i3.91

Warner, J. (2024, October 31). *Deliberate cruelty in higher ed. The reality of being NTT faculty*. Insite Higher Ed. https://www.insidehighered.com/opinion/blogs/just-visiting/2024/10/31/stanfordharvard-are-deliberately-cruel-ntt-faculty

World Health Organization. (2019). *Burn-out an "occupational phenomenon": International classification of diseases*. https://www.who.int/news/item/28-05-2019-burn-out-an-occupational-phenomenon-international-classification-of-diseases

Zerquera, D. D. (2023). Still striving, and for what? Centering equity in the study of prestige seeking in higher education. In L.W. Perna (Ed.), *Higher education: Handbook of theory and research* (pp. 265-324). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-06696-2_3

Kathleen M. Romero, Ed.D., MPH, is a public health executive and former adjunct faculty. Her research focuses on the lived experiences of women contingent faculty, exploring the intersections of gender, burnout, well-being, and the pursuit of prestige within higher education.

Ane Turner Johnson, Ph.D., is a Professor of Educational Leadership at Rowan University in New Jersey. Her scholarship focuses on policymaking and governance in higher education, with particular attention to how institutional structures shape equity, access, and organizational practice.

The Joy Blueprint: Mentorship and Coaching Reimagined

Kadijah Sistrunk, M.Ed., MPA, SHRM-CP

Abstract

The Joy Blueprint explores how coaching, mentorship, and normative uncertainties can be intertwined to produce a unique and favorable outcome of joy in higher education. Most professionals in the field of adult education may never have taken the time to reflect on what exemplifies joy for them, given the demanding nature of the responsibilities and duties associated with their roles. While the field itself can be deeply challenging, it is pivotal for adult learners to tap into joy as a well-designed ecosystem rooted in healthy relationships and collaborative pathways that enhance competence and agility.

Keywords: adult learner, coaching, mentorship, joy, uncertainty

Introduction

Adult education provides a space for adult learners to collaborate through personal, professional, and societal lenses, bringing experiential knowledge, complex identities, and diverse motivations into learning environments. Understanding this scope and sequence helps shape the perspective that adult education is a relational, human-centered practice, grounded in mentorship, coaching, and uncertainty, that fuels educators to cultivate safe spaces where everyone can thrive in the educational ecosystem. In The Joy Blueprint, 'adult learners' refers to higher education professionals. As lifelong learners, these professionals drive the field while remaining committed to the same growth they facilitate in others. In this capacity, we note that adult learners must adopt approaches that integrate respect, reciprocate growth, and cultivate joyful processes that prove that "educating for the sake of joy is possible" (Verdiani, 2013, p. 116).

Joy in Education

Joy, oftentimes viewed as an emotion, can be cultivated as a state of mind in higher education. The core of this process embodies the relationship between adult learners and their self-awareness. This relationship cultivates through four key stages: Acknowledging, Resonating, Revealing, and Joy as Awakening (Verdiani, 2013). To acknowledge in this space of education can be coupled with emotional intelligence. Emotional intelligence enables adult learners to perceive and regulate emotions, enriching interpersonal interactions while boosting motivation and performance (Filice & Weese, 2024).

Acknowledgement can serve as the essential first step toward cultivating joy in higher education, as it establishes the foundation for adult learners to navigate the educational experience with greater clarity, confidence, and effectiveness. With this profound sense of comfort, it is essential for the adult learner to then lean into resonance, as this provides a space for intellectual and emotional understanding that can act as a game changer when fastened with empathy as it relates to finding joy within academia. Resonance leads to revealing because, through self-observation, the evidence of joy can emerge in performance, highlighting both areas of growth and success and guidance toward self-discovery. Through this process of self-discovery, adult learners have opportunities to deepen their engagement as they identify subjects that pique their interests. This heightened engagement encourages adult learners to build stronger connections with peers and mentors as they begin to navigate beyond the traditional boundaries of higher education and proceed to Joy as Awakening. Filice & Weese (2024) describe Joy as Awakening as the "integral part of the living, of the body, of the matter, of the reality, and it travels not only through all these and goes beyond nature, but also surpasses the boundaries, while connecting to a wider dimension" (p. 122). Education can be lifelong and timeless when those who seek it do so with ebullience, allowing one to aim higher in curiosity for knowledge. This intentional engagement enables adult learners to connect with joy not merely as a momentary emotion, but as a sustained state of mind that supports purpose, resilience, and meaningful learning.

Drawing upon the "Free Progress" pedagogical approach, which asserts that learners of any age develop greater confidence, curiosity, and openness to the world when they are supported in pursuing their intrinsic interests (Verdiani, 2013), one can conclude that the possibilities for fostering joy in higher education are expansive when adult learners and their leaders prioritize holistic growth and well-being. This perspective invites a broader reconsideration of how learning environments are intentionally designed and experienced. It also emphasizes the importance of attending to emotional, social, and motivational dimensions of learning alongside cognitive outcomes. This perspective may begin with choosing authentic professional development opportunities that allow adult learners to make real-world and personal connections. Van Merriënboer & Kester (2005) describe authentic learning as the driving force for learning that enhances competence in problem-solving and reasoning, making the academic journey more enjoyable for adult learners.

While intrinsic motivation must be present for all adult learners to succeed and thrive, leaders must heed the Path–Goal Theory, which prioritizes inspiration over decision-making and serves as a framework for guiding learners through the stages of Acknowledging and Reasoning, crucial components of andragogy's adult learning principles. The Path Goal Theory uniquely positions adult learners and leaders to build strong relationships, enabling them to determine the best

paths, obstacles, and support (Bans-Akutey, 2021). This approach reinforces the idea that educational leadership is inherently relational and adaptive. It also underscores the value of flexibility when responding to diverse needs and contextual challenges. Such alignment between leadership practices and adult learner experiences can strengthen trust and engagement within academic environments. Imagine adult learners who are guided according to their individual needs rather than the agenda of leaders. This guidance supports joy as an enduring state of mind, rooted in confidence, self-efficacy, and purpose, rather than a temporary emotional response, particularly as learners navigate the academy in an era of uncertainty.

The Era of Uncertainty

Uncertainty can primarily be viewed as doubt concerning "what to do". While there is an array of types of uncertainty, Bradley & Drechsler (2014) define normative uncertainty as being uncertain about what is considered desirable or what "should be". Normative uncertainty directly impacts joy in adult education, as adult learners and leaders in the field ponder what should matter most in education and what kinds of learning experiences are worth designing. Knowles et al. (2025) emphasize that adults are motivated to learn when they recognize needs and interests that learning can address. That experience serves as a central resource for learning, making the analysis of experience a core methodological approach. Understanding adult education in its entirety can best prepare adult learners to navigate normative uncertainties while cultivating a joyful mindset.

A great deal of anxiety and stress can form from uncertainty. NCCFD (2026) suggests that assessing and adjusting can help break the cycle of overwhelm and brain-dumping stressors. Strengths and needed support can help act rather than react to reclaim agency. Assessing, adjusting, and brain dumping require remaining in a constant loop of evaluation, similar to the ADDIE model used in instructional design, so one can take time to reflect on progress, obstacles, and successes. In essence, this allows one to implement the Path Goal Theory, which aims to define goals, clarify paths, remove obstacles, and seek support (Bans- Akutey, 2021). It also highlights an adaptive approach that tailors the path forward to individual needs, transforming the anxiety of uncertainty into a sustained sense of conviction and initiative. By prioritizing holistic growth, adult learners can turn constant self-evaluation into a generative process that fosters readiness for future tasks.

Mentorship

Transformation begins within self and community, a direct path into mentorship. Marino (2021) defines mentorship as the sharing of experiences, knowledge, and hardships to help others grow. When incorporated properly, mentorship can be relationship-driven, holistic, and a worthwhile

leadership practice. The Path-Goal Theory has a major impact here as all mentor-mentee relationships are unique and impel leaders to tailor their approach in a directive, supportive, participative, or achievement-oriented style based on the mentee (Bans-Akutey, 2021). Keeping this in mind while providing equity-centered support will make all the difference in life-changing mentorship. While analyzing joy as a state of mind fueled internally, the idea of empathy takes center stage because, to be a mentor, one must resonate with others' feelings and emotions to help them become their best selves in myriad ways. Mentorship is reciprocal. To effectively mentor students, educators must first receive holistic development that addresses the "broadest development of the whole person" across cognitive and affective levels (Mahmoudi et al., 2021, p. 179). The Joy Blueprint uses Baldegger's (2025) system methodology approach: analysis, conception, and implementation, to aid in overcoming normative uncertainties in mentorship that connect to emotional strain and professional development for identity development, resilience, and ambiguity navigation for adult learners.

Although numerous rationales for mentorship exist, emotional strain and professional challenges emerge as two central factors influencing adult learners' capacity to thrive. To begin tackling these problems, emotional strain can link to the well-being of adult learners, and professional roadblocks can correlate with psychological challenges and burnout. Emeljanovas et al. (2023) describe well-being as a reflection of professional satisfaction and happiness, and perceive it as a multidimensional, multilayered psychological construct. Main components of positive well-being include healthy relationships with colleagues, emotion regulation, feeling successful as a teacher, and institutional resources that support. Psychological distress and burnout are byproducts of negative professional environments. These factors: well-being, psychological distress, and burnout, directly impact adult learners as a whole due to them going against the feeling of safety and security based on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. Safety and security in this context can relate to financial stability, job security, and good health (Dar & Sakthivel, 2022), all elements that help make individuals function properly from within and are capable of embodying emotional intelligence for the sake of mentorship.

Coaching

In educational spaces, everyone aims to reach their full potential and do their very best, whether their role is to lead, educate, or learn. Helping others reach their utmost ability can be achieved through a core method, coaching, which relies heavily on nurturing strong relationships, "ensuring high-quality feedback, nourishing a growth mindset, and encouraging an institutional culture that embraces feedback and coaching" (Atkinson et al., 2022, p. 441). Effectiveness in coaching stems from the ability to be creative in approaches and outputs. Knowles et al. (2025) define creative leaders as those who "have faith in people, offer them challenging opportunities, and delegate responsibility to them" (p. 138). Adequate creative coaching can help fulfill esteem

and self-actualization needs according to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. Esteem involves both self-confidence and external appreciation; therefore, creative leaders must explicitly affirm educator competence (Dar & Sakthivel, 2022). Self-actualization, the peak of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, has two key areas relevant to educators' coachability: ego deflation and realism. Gopinath (2020) notes that these characteristics are essential for building relationships, as they reduce conflict and anxiety, fostering constructive perspectives and positive feelings.

Skill development and adaptation to new tools will remain a revolving door for higher education as these are essential elements to provide superlative academic experiences; hence, self-actualization provides constructive feedback and guidance to acquiring competence in skills relative to new tools such as GenAI, a necessary tool to "enhance learning experiences and create new opportunities for innovation in educational practices" (Wang, et al., 2024, p. 2) or how to develop effective course content. With this in mind, coaches can provide training and support on the effective use of GenAI. Institutions must take the initiative to develop policies and guidance on the ethical use of GenAI (Wang et al., 2024) to foster adult learners' willingness to be innovative and to help students understand the importance of producing authentic work. Creative coaches in this sense have a duty to help produce a growth mindset within educators that removes skill and will gaps with an aim for them to build self-esteem and self-actualization, which both can influence their journey to joy as awakening, as the first step is to raise their own consciousness (Verdiani, 2013), for the benefit of impactful course development.

Conclusion

Joy in the academy in an era of uncertainty can be an extremely difficult topic to navigate and address in higher education today. Professionals in any field have their own intrinsic and extrinsic motivations for continuing to pursue their careers; however, academic professionals have a profound obligation to learners worldwide to provide learning experiences that will shape and mold the workforce for today and future generations. While The Joy Blueprint noted normative uncertainties in today's higher education environment, several other uncertainties exist, and there will never be a one-stop solution to any of them; however, it is never about the troubles that arise. How individuals choose to navigate them is what matters most. To address uncertainty, educators can tap into self-awareness as a first step to overcoming doubts, as this helps them understand what matters most to them, which eventually guides how they would like to proceed. When self-awareness is a struggle, mentorship and coaching are sound solutions. The beauty in receiving mentorship from those in the same field is that shared experiences may be more common than not, and it leaves room for peers to resonate with one another, as mentors are "exceptional leaders and often are the ones who stand up for their mentees and support them when they are experiencing the most challenging moments. They also encourage and push their

mentees to take on bigger challenges" (Marino, 2021, p. 748), which is crucial for this era of uncertainty in higher education.

Coaching, alternatively, shows support and guidance differently as it "emphasizes learning, performance improvement, and personal or professional growth" (Atkinson et al., 2022, p. 442). This is where those in coaching positions have the chance to supply ongoing feedback for areas of growth while also dispensing praise reports to keep intrinsic motivation levels elevated while maintaining a "dynamic and co-constructive interaction in the context of a safe and mutually respectful relationship for the purpose of challenging an educator's ways of thinking, acting or being to support growth" (Atkinson et al., 2022, p. 442). Just as everyone possesses different learning styles, educators will need different coaching styles to tailor to their unique needs, as outlined by the Path-Goal Theory. There are four different leadership styles that coaches can apply: directive style, which is task-related; a supportive style, which is relational; participative style, which is process-related; and achievement-oriented style, which is identity or status-related" (Bans-Akutey, 2021, p. 3). Whichever style is implemented, coaches should remain creative in their approach, as this can foster innovation among those led (Knowles et al., 2025).

The Joy Blueprint offers a clear framework for understanding uncertainty and joy in higher education. How professionals in this field choose to press forward in navigating uncertainties and choosing to find joy can be accomplished through coaching, mentorship, self-reflection, and self-awareness. No matter the circumstances, self-awareness remains the first step in discovering joy, as it lays the foundation for the support needed to achieve it, i.e., coaching, mentorship, or a combination of both. It is the responsibility of leaders and instructors to create organizational cultures that exude community-like behaviors: support shows in times of need, accomplishments are recognized and, at times, awarded, and innovation is at the forefront of enhancement efforts to foster a culture of growth. Altogether, The Joy Blueprint has taken a distinctive journey toward seeking joy in an era of uncertainty by rediscovering education's true meaning: to lead, nourish, and bring out the best in us as academic professionals (Verdiani, 2013).

References

Atkinson, A., Watling, C. J., & Brand, P. L. (2022). Feedback and coaching. *European Journal of Pediatrics*, *181*(2), 441–446.

Baldegger, R. (2025). *Management in a dynamic environment: Concepts, methods, and tools.*

Bans-Akutey, A. (2021). The path-goal theory of leadership. *Academia Letters*, *2*(748), 10–20935.

Bradley, R., & Drechsler, M. (2014). Types of uncertainty. *Erkenntnis*, *79*(6), 1225–1248.

Chuttur, M. (2009). *Overview of the technology acceptance model: Origins, developments and future directions.*

Dar, S. A., & Sakthivel, P. (2022). Maslow's hierarchy of needs is still relevant in the 21st century. *Journal of Learning and Educational Policy*, *2*(5), 1–9.

Emeljanovas, A., Sabaliauskas, S., Mežienė, B., & Istomina, N. (2023). The relationships between teachers' emotional health and stress coping. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *14*, 1276431.

Filice, L., & Weese, W. J. (2024). Developing emotional intelligence. *Encyclopedia*, *4*(1), 583–599.

Gopinath, R. (2020). Prominence of self-actualization in organization. *International Journal of Advanced Science and Technology*, *29*(3), 11591–11602.

Knowles, M. S., Robinson, P. A., & Caraccioli, C. (2025). *The adult learner: The definitive classic in adult education and human resource development* (10th ed.). Routledge.

Mahmoudi, S., Jafari, E., Nasrabadi, H. A., & Liaghatdar, M. J. (2012). Holistic education: An approach for 21st century. *International Education Studies*, *5*(2), 178–186.

Marino, F. E. (2021). Mentoring gone wrong: What is happening to mentorship in academia? *Policy Futures in Education*, *19*(7), 747–751.

National Center for Faculty Development and Diversity (NCCFD). (2026). *Navigating uncertainty in higher education: Strategies for faculty*.

Van Merriënboer, J. J., & Kester, L. (2005). The four-component instructional design model: Multimedia principles in environments for complex learning. In *The Cambridge handbook of multimedia learning* (pp. 71–93).

Verdiani, A. (2013). Educating for joy. *Transdisciplinary Journal of Engineering & Science*, *4*, 116–123.

Wang, H., Dang, A., Wu, Z., & Mac, S. (2024). Generative AI in higher education: Seeing ChatGPT through universities' policies, resources, and guidelines. *Computers and Education: Artificial Intelligence*, *7*, 100326.

Kadijah Sistrunk is an Instructional Designer in the College of Aviation at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University. As a SHRM-CP, she combines expertise in organizational development, coaching, and mentorship with a growing focus on global leadership. Kadijah has shared her work and insights at conferences led by the Online Learning Consortium AHEA, and Embry-Riddle. Through her participation in the Leadership + Design Fellowship this year, she aims to strengthen her leadership capabilities and advance her contributions to higher education, organizational leadership, and global engagement.

Opening the Door, But Not Entering: Adult College Students Who Apply, But Do Not Enroll

Juliette Punchello

Abstract

Adult learners now represent a significant portion of higher education applicants in the United States, yet many who begin the admissions process do not complete enrollment. This study examined the reasons prospective adult students applied but ultimately chose not to enroll at Thomas Edison State University. Using survey data and qualitative interviews from undergraduate applicants between 2019 and 2023, the findings identified financial concerns, family responsibilities, employment obligations, and limited institutional support as the primary barriers to enrollment. Participants emphasized the importance of transparent financial information, flexible support services, and personalized advising. The study highlights the need for higher education institutions to implement targeted strategies that better support adult learners and reduce barriers between application and enrollment.

Keywords*:* adult learners, higher education enrollment, non-traditional students, financial barriers, institutional support

Introduction

Adult learners now comprise a substantial portion of higher education applicants in the United States, yet many who begin the admissions process never complete enrollment. “Non-traditional students, or adult learners, are the new majority in the classroom in any sector of higher education” (MacDonald, 2018, p. 1). This phenomenon presents a significant challenge for colleges and universities seeking to stabilize enrollment, improve access, and support workforce development. “Higher education serves several important purposes, including strengthening communication and critical thinking skills, preparing individuals for responsible citizenship, expanding intellectual interests, and helping people to navigate an increasingly diverse and global society” (Burning Glass, 2024, p. 3).

Despite the well-documented academic, economic, and social benefits associated with earning a college degree, adult students frequently encounter barriers that interrupt their educational pathways. Rising tuition costs, concerns about student debt, competing family responsibilities, and employment demands all contribute to enrollment hesitancy among this population. Additionally, the number of both traditional and adult students enrolling in college is flat or declining. Nationally, “undergraduate college enrollment dropped 8% from 2019 to 2022, with declines even after returning to in-person classes” (Causey, Gardner, Pevitz, Ryu, & Shapiro, 2023, p.2).

Understanding why adult learners apply but do not enroll is essential for developing institutional strategies that address their unique needs, providing insight into the complex interplay of personal, financial, and institutional factors influencing adult learner decision-making.

Survey, Data and Findings

The findings shared in the AHEA presentation were from a research study which was limited to prospective adult, non-traditional students who applied but did not enroll in undergraduate online or in-person degree programs at Thomas Edison State University. The study sample consisted of two groups. The first group in the study was of 362 undergraduate degree applicants who completed an application for an undergraduate online degree between July 2019 and September 2020 but did not progress to enrollment. The second group included 28 undergraduate degree applicants who applied for an online program between January 2023 and June 2023 but did not choose to enroll.

Survey findings indicated that financial concerns were the most frequently cited reason for non-enrollment, with nearly 40 percent of respondents identifying tuition costs, limited financial aid, or debt aversion as primary barriers. “Cost remains a persistent hurdle for 85% of unenrolled adults” (Gallup, 2024, p. 25). Financial barriers remained central throughout the study. Many adult learners expressed reluctance to take on student loan debt later in life, particularly when balancing mortgages, childcare costs, or retirement planning. Limited payment plan options and lack of transparent cost information further discouraged enrollment.

Family obligations, including childcare and elder care, further complicated enrollment decisions for many applicants. Qualitative interview data reinforced these findings while revealing additional nuances. Many participants described themselves as part of the 'sandwich generation,' simultaneously caring for children and aging parents. Others expressed uncertainty about the long-term return on investment of a degree, particularly for those nearing retirement age. “Successful institutions will nurture students from awareness through graduation and support students as they balance work, education, and other competing priorities” (Education Dynamics, 2023, p. 49).

Job-related responsibilities were cited by more than one-quarter of respondents, reflecting the challenges of balancing full-time employment with academic commitments. According to Georgetown University’s report: Projections of Jobs, Education, and Training Requirements through 2023 (2023), “workers who lack postsecondary education or training will be left behind—unemployed, underemployed, or stuck in low-wage jobs” (p. 72). Adults understand the financial need to earn a degree for career stability and advancement.

A prominent theme across both data sets was the critical role of institutional support and communication. Participants consistently emphasized the importance of personalized advising, timely responses, and clear guidance regarding degree pathways. “For non-traditional students,

policies that assist them in an early stage are shown to be of critical importance, for example by offering pre-enrollment preparatory courses or by joining them, in the classroom, with students with similar characteristics" (Carreira, 2019, p. 1340).

Conclusion

The decision for adult learners to apply but not enroll is shaped by a complex combination of financial, personal, and institutional factors. This study highlights the importance of understanding adult learner experiences and addressing systemic barriers within higher education institutions. By improving advising, simplifying transfer credit processes, increasing financial transparency, and expanding flexible support options, colleges and universities can better serve adult learners. As adult students continue to represent a growing segment of the higher education population, targeted strategies to support their enrollment and persistence are essential. Addressing the application-to-enrollment gap not only benefits institutions but also strengthens workforce development and expands educational access for adult learners nationwide.

References

Burning Glass Institute and Strada Institute for the Future of Work, (2024). Talent disrupted:

Underemployment, college graduates, and the way forward. https://stradaeducation.org/report/talent-disrupted/

Carnevale, A., Smith, N., Van Der Werf, M., & Quinn, M.C. (2023) *After everything: projections of jobs, education, and training requirements through 2031*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, 2023. https://cew.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/Projections2031-National-Report.pdf

Carreira, P., & Lopes, A. S. (2019). Drivers of academic pathways in higher education: traditional vs. non-traditional students. *Studies in Higher Education, 46(7)*, 1340–1355. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2019.1675621

Causey, J., Gardner, A., Pevitz, A., Ryu, M., and Shapiro, D. (2023). *Some college, no credential student outcomes, annual progress report – academic year 2021/22*. National Student Clearinghouse Research

Center. https://nscresearchcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/SCNCReport2023.pdf

Education Dynamics. (2023). *Online college students report 2023*

https://insights.educationdynamics.com/rs/183-YME-928/images/EDDY-online-college-students-2023.pdf

Gallup, Inc. (2024). The state of higher education 2024. https://www.luminafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/State-of-Higher-Education-2024.pdf

MacDonald, K. (2018). A review of the literature: The needs of non-traditional students in postsecondary education. *Strategic Enrollment Management Quarterly*, *5*(4), 159–164. https://doi.org/10.1002/sem3.20115

Dr. Juliette Punchello serves as the Senior Director of Graduate Admissions, Recruitment and Enrollment Management at Thomas Edison State University in Trenton, New Jersey. She is an expert in adult, online, higher education and assessment, providing strategic leadership in recruitment, admission, advising, and enrollment. Dr. Punchello develops scalable outreach initiatives that deliver personalized, student-centered experiences and strengthens relationships with external partners to position the University as an innovative academic institution.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) in Practice: Supporting Adult Learners in Asynchronous Online Learning

Minghan Gao and Xi Lin

Abstract

Adult learners prefer asynchronous online learning because of its flexibility and accessibility (Park & Choi, 2025). However, effective teaching in asynchronous online learning format requires the instructors to design the course to meet the learning needs of adult learners (Ausburn, 2004). Guided by Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and Knowles' (1984a, 1984b) four principles of andragogy, this study specifically introduces several teaching strategies that have been successfully implemented in fully asynchronous online courses to support adult learning. It is expected that this article would offer practical implications for adult educators, thereby enhancing the accessibility, engagement, and effectiveness of their online teaching practices.

Keywords: adult learners, asynchronous online learning, Universal Design for Learning (UDL), Knowles' Four Principles of Andragogy

Adult Learners in Asynchronous Online Learning

Adult learners need to balance their learning goals with work, family, and other commitments (Knowles, 1984a), thus, attending asynchronous online courses works the best for this learner population (Park & Choi, 2025). Different than face-to-face learning or synchronous online learning that require real-time engagement, asynchronous online learning allows learners to access and interact with learning materials on their own pace and anywhere (Martin & Bolliger, 2018). In other words, this format allows adult learners to participate learning with flexibility and autonomy, and they can study based on their own schedules, learn at their own pace, and revisit materials through learning management systems (LMSs) as needed (Hrastinski, 2008). This flexibility also leads to their fully participation in activities, especially online discussions. Adult learners have more time to think and share their insights, thereby promoting meaningful online interaction with their peers, instructors, and the learning materials (Hrastinski, 2008).

However, several challenges are observed in this learning format. The lack of real-time interaction can lead to feelings of isolation and disconnection from peers and instructors (Bowers & Kumar, 2015). Additionally, delays in feedback or support can hinder adults' motivation and learning progress (Joulani et al., 2013). Therefore, effective online course design should foster social presence, a sense of community, and timely communication (Cui et al., 2013).

Adult Learners' Learning Needs

Adult learners have their unique learning needs according to Knowles' four principles of andragogy (Knowles, 1984b, 1984c): involvement, experience, problem-centered learning, and relevance. Specifically, adult learners are usually self-directed, and they are actively involved in their learning process. They bring rich knowledge and life experiences to their learning, and they learn most effectively through active engagement and reflective practice. Rather than passively receiving knowledge, adult learners usually benefit from problem-centered approaches that emphasize real-world application. Lastly, they are motivated when learning is relevant to their personal or professional lives.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) For Adult Online Instruction

Adult learners' needs for learning are usually rooted from their individual motivations as well as prior and current work or life experiences; meeting their varied needs through is significant to their success in learning (Knowles, 1984a, 1985b, 1984c; Petty & Thomas, 2014). UDL aims at improving and optimizing teaching and learning for all individuals, as it argues that learning is an individualized process, and that curriculum should be designed from the outset to accommodate this variability (Rose et al., 2005). Instead of treating learner differences as problems to be solved after curriculum development, UDL incorporates them into the initial course design process (CAST, 2011). This framework highlights that learning barriers are caused by curricula, which prevent learners to use different ways to access, engage with, and express their understanding of material (CAST, 2015). Therefore, UDL calls for developing various approaches to promote three key phases or principles: engagement, representation, and action and expression.

First, creating multiple means of engagement focuses on motivating learners by offering them with different ways to foster interest, maintain focus, and challenge them at appropriate levels. Engagement strategies may include offering choices, connecting content to real-world applications, or adjusting levels of challenge to match learner readiness. This principle emphasizes that learner motivation and emotional engagement can significantly influence their learning outcomes (CAST, 2011, 2015).

Second, creating multiple means of representation refers to the need for presenting learning content in various ways to meet learners' different learning preferences. For instance, some learners may prefer textual content, while others may benefit from visual or auditory formats. This principle argues that a single mode of representation cannot effectively reach all learners, and it advocates for the effective communication of information to all learners (CAST, 2011, 2015).

Lastly, creating multiple means of action and expression calls for providing learners with different ways to express what they know about the learning content. Strategies usually involve allowing oral presentations, written work, multimedia products, or performance-based

assessments. This approach highlights the importance of accommodating individual preferences and abilities (CAST, 2011, 2015).

Curriculum design that developed based on the UDL framework could provide optional accommodations for learners, as well as ensure that they are given equitable opportunities to succeed (Rose et al., 2006). As Courey et al. (2013) emphasized that UDL minimizes the implications of learner differences by embedding accessibility features into the curriculum design process itself. Therefore, by implementing the three key principles, educators can build inclusive learning environments that recognize and embrace learner variability from the outset.

UDL-Aligned Teaching Strategies

Integrating UDL in online adult learning courses is significant. Researchers (Rogers-Shaw et al., 2018) discussed how UDL principles should be applied in course redesigning, including re-creating multiple means of engagement, representation, and action and expression for text selection, syllabus format, assessment criteria and descriptions, assessment methods, and communication with students. Building on these foundational insights, combined with the four principles of andragogy, our study introduces a variety of specific UDL-aligned teaching strategies that have successfully supported adult learning. These strategies have been implemented in several fully asynchronous, graduate-level online courses, each with approximately 12–15 adult learners from diverse backgrounds, within an adult education program at a research institution in the southeastern United States.

Multimodal Weekly Announcements

One effective strategy for maintaining instructor presence and clarity in asynchronous online courses is the use of multimodal weekly announcements. The instructor posts announcements in both video (with captions) and text formats. The video announcements can help build a sense of connection between the instructor and students, enhancing a sense of community (Bolliger & Martin, 2018). Meanwhile, the text-based announcements can provide a quick reference for learners who prefer written communication or those with difficulties to access videos or audio.

Q&A Discussion for Peer Learning

A Q&A discussion board is created to support adult learners in asynchronous online learning environments in addition to office hours. This space allows learners to ask questions and receive answers from both the instructor and their peers. This strategy aims to motivate peer-to-peer and peer-to-instructor interaction as well as a collaborative learning community (Kuo et al., 2014; Moore, 1993). Additionally, this approach has the potential to empower adult learners to take an active role in their learning, aligning with these learners' preference for self-directed learning.

Video and Audio Discussion Posts

Although text-based discussions are commonly used in asynchronous online discussion boards, some learners find it more engaging to express their thoughts verbally. Therefore, learners are provided with the options to post either video, audio, or text-based threads and responses in the discussion board, thus enhancing social presence and meet learners' diverse communication preferences. Meanwhile, video and audio posts can reduce a sense of isolation in the asynchronous online learning context (Borup et al., 2011).

Integrating Creative Activities

Various creative activities have been developed to engage online adult learners. One example is the use of memes which ask learners to express their thoughts and feelings regarding using technology by creating, posting, and explaining their own meme to the class (see Figure 1). This activity further encourages adult learners to share common experiences and emotions related to using technology in both their personal and professional lives, thus building a safe space for peer learning (Lin & Sun, 2023).

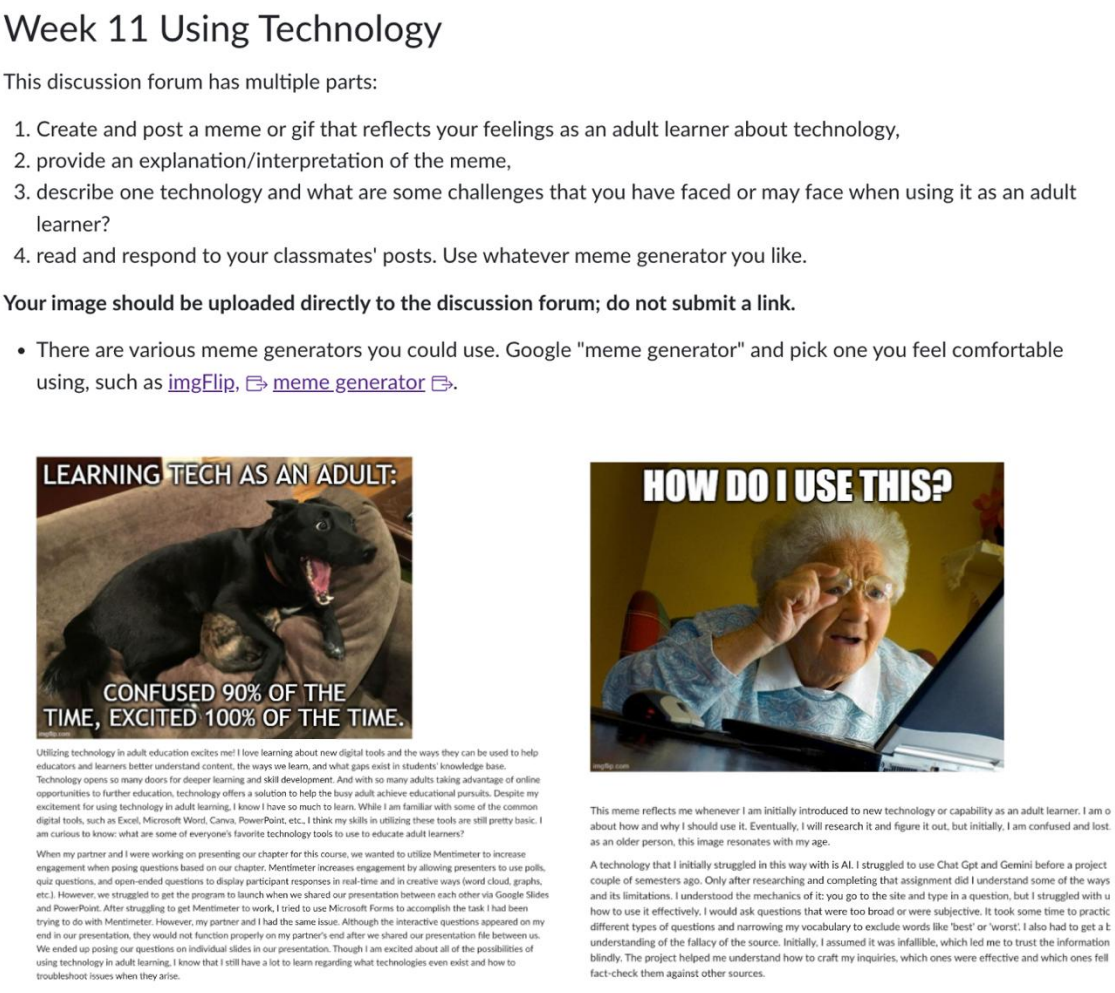


Figure 1. Meme Activity and Student-created Meme Examples

Another tool is the use of video timeline-anchor comment, which asks learners to share their thoughts and participate in discussions directly within video-based lectures as they watch them (see Figure 2). This approach also helps bridge the gap between offline and online learning by providing them with a sense of real-time classroom interaction and shared learning with their classmates (Lin et al., 2024)

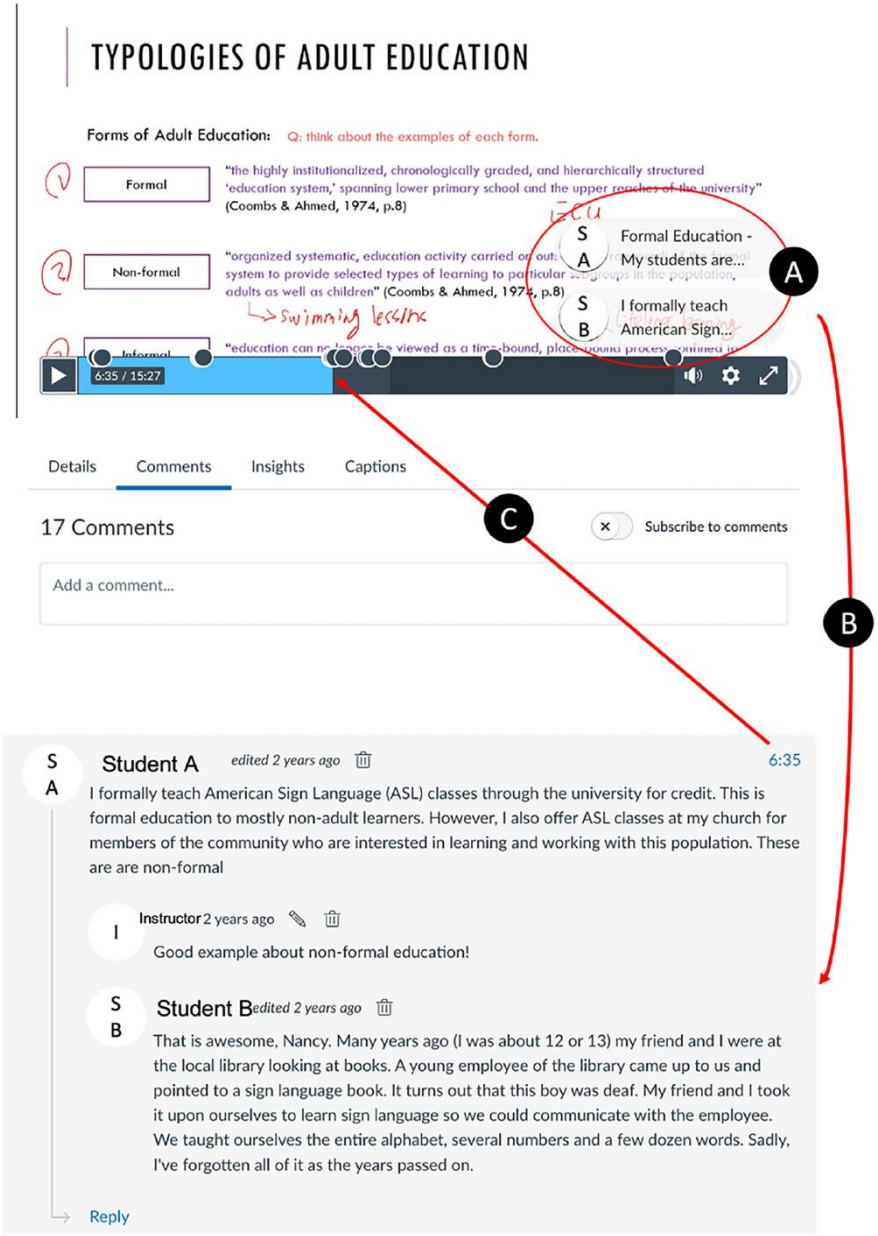


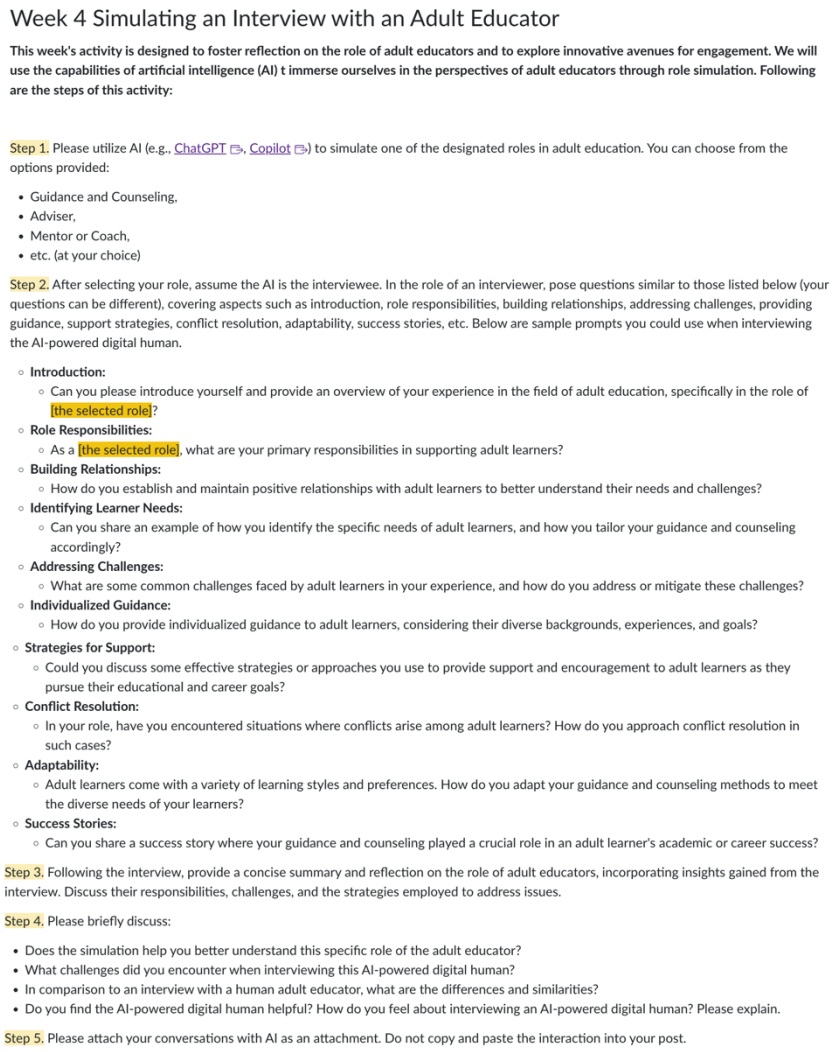
Figure 2. Using the VTC in Canvas Studio.

A. Comments made at 6:35 of the video jumped out at the right corner of the screen.

B. When clicking the bubble, Canvas Studio directs the viewers to the full remarks.

C. When clicking the time (i.e., 6:35), Canvas Studio directs the viewers to the video where the specific comment was made.

Artificial intelligence (AI) is also allowed to use for specific activities, such as conducting role-playing scenarios with AI to learn about the professional roles and responsibilities of an adult educator (see Figures 3 and 4). This activity addresses the challenge that are usually faced by adult learners who may not have time to interview real human experts (Lin et al., 2025) Additionally, learners are encouraged to seek immediate feedback from AI as a virtual tutor on their assignments before submitting them for human instructor review. This option allows learners to refine their work and is especially helpful for those who may feel uncomfortable asking peers for assistance.



Week 4 Simulating an Interview with an Adult Educator

This week's activity is designed to foster reflection on the role of adult educators and to explore innovative avenues for engagement. We will use the capabilities of artificial intelligence (AI) t immerse ourselves in the perspectives of adult educators through role simulation. Following are the steps of this activity:

Step 1. Please utilize AI (e.g., ChatGPT, Copilot) to simulate one of the designated roles in adult education. You can choose from the options provided:

- Guidance and Counseling,
- Adviser,
- Mentor or Coach,
- etc. (at your choice)

Step 2. After selecting your role, assume the AI is the interviewee. In the role of an interviewer, pose questions similar to those listed below (your questions can be different), covering aspects such as introduction, role responsibilities, building relationships, addressing challenges, providing guidance, support strategies, conflict resolution, adaptability, success stories, etc. Below are sample prompts you could use when interviewing the AI-powered digital human.

- **Introduction:**
  - Can you please introduce yourself and provide an overview of your experience in the field of adult education, specifically in the role of [the selected role]?
- **Role Responsibilities:**
  - As a [the selected role], what are your primary responsibilities in supporting adult learners?
- **Building Relationships:**
  - How do you establish and maintain positive relationships with adult learners to better understand their needs and challenges?
- **Identifying Learner Needs:**
  - Can you share an example of how you identify the specific needs of adult learners, and how you tailor your guidance and counseling accordingly?
- **Addressing Challenges:**
  - What are some common challenges faced by adult learners in your experience, and how do you address or mitigate these challenges?
- **Individualized Guidance:**
  - How do you provide individualized guidance to adult learners, considering their diverse backgrounds, experiences, and goals?
- **Strategies for Support:**
  - Could you discuss some effective strategies or approaches you use to provide support and encouragement to adult learners as they pursue their educational and career goals?
- **Conflict Resolution:**
  - In your role, have you encountered situations where conflicts arise among adult learners? How do you approach conflict resolution in such cases?
- **Adaptability:**
  - Adult learners come with a variety of learning styles and preferences. How do you adapt your guidance and counseling methods to meet the diverse needs of your learners?
- **Success Stories:**
  - Can you share a success story where your guidance and counseling played a crucial role in an adult learner's academic or career success?

Step 3. Following the interview, provide a concise summary and reflection on the role of adult educators, incorporating insights gained from the interview. Discuss their responsibilities, challenges, and the strategies employed to address issues.

Step 4. Please briefly discuss:

- Does the simulation help you better understand this specific role of the adult educator?
- What challenges did you encounter when interviewing this AI-powered digital human?
- In comparison to an interview with a human adult educator, what are the differences and similarities?
- Do you find the AI-powered digital human helpful? How do you feel about interviewing an AI-powered digital human? Please explain.

Step 5. Please attach your conversations with AI as an attachment. Do not copy and paste the interaction into your post.

Figure 3. AI Role-Play Activity

Part 1: Role of Adult Educators

The role of college advisors regarding adult learners is to understand their unique challenges, support the development of essential skills, and provide motivation for success. The simulated college advisor reported that its primary responsibilities were to work with students to make a course plan that aligns with their goals; helps them balance their personal and academic lives; and is realistic financially, among other things. The simulated advisor also listed connecting students with tutoring and assisting students to learn and practice good time management were important to their job. Finally, words like "encourage"/"encouraging," "motivate"/"motivating," and "confident"/"confidence" occurred frequently throughout the interview. It was clear that the simulated advisor considered offering emotional support to students critical to their success. All of these factors can be clearly seen in the simulated advisor's success story, which was about a woman named Mary who wanted to become a registered nurse. The advisor shared that Mary was a non-traditional student who was a mother, worked full-time, and dealt with financial stress. The advisor reported that Maria's initial challenges included a lack of confidence and struggling with time management. Through goal setting and prioritization, emotional and motivational support, and career counseling, Maria successfully became a registered nurse.

Part 2: Simulation/AI Reflection

- **Does the simulation help you better understand this specific role of the adult educator?**
  - I think that this simulation reinforced ideas I already had about the role of a college advisor. It was very affirming to see the emphasis the simulated advisor put on supporting students emotionally, as a lack of confidence can severely hobble a student's potential for success.
- **What challenges did you encounter when interviewing this AI-powered digital human?**
  - The only challenge I felt that I encountered is that the AI can and will give lengthy answers. As I progressed through my questions, I started to ask it to limit its responses to one example or situation so that I could have more detail about one thing instead of minimal details about several things.
- **In comparison to an interview with a human adult educator, what are the differences and similarities?**
  - While the simulated advisor was easier to access as someone who works full time, interviewing a human adult educator can provide a more specific insight into the adult students in my area. While the simulated advisor gave great broad answers, the challenges, needs, and successes of students are vastly different across North Carolina and the United States.
- **Do you find the AI-powered digital human helpful? How do you feel about interviewing an AI-powered digital human? Please explain.**
  - I found interviewing the simulated advisor helpful in reinforcing strategies for supporting adult learners that I have learned previously. I wasn't uncomfortable interviewing the simulated advisor, but, again, I wonder how the responses would have been different if I had spoken to an advisor at my local community college or a nearby university.

Part 3: Simulated Interview

Student Advisor ChatGPT Simulated Interview.pdf

Figure 4. Example of Student Post for AI Role-Play

Combined ULD and Andragogy to Support Adult Learning

These ULD-aligned strategies address adult learners' diverse needs for learning that relate to involvement, experience, problem-centered learning, and relevance (see Table 1).

Table 1. UDL-aligned Teaching Strategies

UDL Principle	Teaching Strategy	Description & Alignment	Knowles' Principles

Engagement	Q&A Discussion for Interactions	Encourages peer-to-peer and peer-to-instructor interactions; supports autonomy and collaboration; builds a strong learning community.	**Involvement:** Engages learners in directing their learning through social exchange and community-building.
	Video/Audio/Text Discussion Posts	Offers communication flexibility to match learner preferences; enhances social presence and comfort in sharing ideas.	**Experience:** Involve learners' past experience and preferences to express thoughts in familiar modalities.
	Meme Creation & Video Timeline-Anchored Comments	Stimulates emotional and cognitive engagement; encourages active participation through humor and "real-time" feedback.	**Problem-Centered Learning:** Makes abstract learning more concrete and relatable; encourages real-world connections.
	AI Role-Playing Activities	Provides immersive and low-stakes environments for exploring professional roles, increasing motivation and relevance to learners' goals.	**Relevance:** Ties learning to professional applications and future goals.
Representation	Multimodal Weekly Announcements (video/text)	Supports varied learning preferences and accessibility needs; improves clarity and comprehension with visual and auditory reinforcement.	**Experience:** Involve learners' past experiences using familiar formats; increases accessibility.
	Q&A Discussion for Interactions	Delivers content explanations in diverse formats; supports deeper	**Involvement:** Learners actively construct meaning through questions,

		understanding through peer and instructor input.	responses, and clarification.
Action and Expression	AI Feedback on Assignments	Enables self-directed learning through private, instant, and adaptive guidance, allowing students to revise before instructor feedback.	**Problem-Centered Learning:** Promotes autonomy and improvement based on personalized, actionable feedback.
	Video/Audio/Text Discussion Posts	Allows learners to express what they have learned in their preferred format, supporting expression and mastery through varied media.	**Involvement:** Encourages self-directed expression and ownership of knowledge through flexible formats.

Design Multiple Means of Engagement

This phase focuses on maintaining student motivation, fostering collaboration, and supporting persistence in learning. Strategies such as allowing students to post discussion posts in different formats meet their different communication preferences. This approach also enhances social presence and engages adult learners within the asynchronous online learning, thereby supporting their autonomy and involvement. Moreover, encouraging peer-to-peer and peer-to-instructor Q&A interactions motivates a sense of shared responsibility and promotes collaborative learning. Additionally, the use of creative activities, such as meme creation or video timeline-anchored commenting, stimulates both emotional and cognitive engagement as concluded by Lin and Sun (2023) and Lin et al. (2024). These strategies potentially benefit learners to transition from passive consumption to active participation, thus keeping their learning interest and motivation. Lastly, involving the role-play with AI allows learners to immerse themselves in real-world scenarios while receiving immediate and low-stakes feedback as indicated by Lin et al. (2025). Meanwhile, simulating professional scenarios also adds relevance to adult learners' current or future career goals.

Design Multiple Means of Representation

This phase emphasizes providing learners diverse ways to perceive and comprehend the course content, which is essential in asynchronous online learning environments where learners vary in learning preferences, technical resources, and accessibility needs. Posting weekly

announcements in multiple formats at the same time ensures the accessibility for visual and auditory learners while also offering options for those who prefer reading. Such delivery strategy can improve engagement and clarity. The Q&A discussion board also enables learners to choose the option, from instructor posts to peer responses, that best supports their comprehension. Furthermore, allowing them to share understanding via interaction also reinforces adult learners' involvement in knowledge-building

Design Multiple Means of Action and Expression

This phase stresses how learners express what they have learned, highlighting the need for flexible expression formats. Specifically, for learners who hesitate to seek peer assistance, AI could offer a private and personalized space for their learning support. Seeking AI feedback on assignments before submitting to instructor can additionally empower self-directed revision, aligning with problem-centered learning as discussed by Lin (2025). Lastly, allowing multiple formats for discussion posts can promote ownership and expression, supporting adult learners' involvement and preference for expressing mastery in ways that they feel most comfortable with.

Implications for Adult Educators

This study highlights the importance of integrating the UDL framework and Knowles' (1984a, 1984b) four principles of andragogy into fully asynchronous online course design, enabling educators to create inclusive and engaging online learning environments that address the diverse learning needs of adult learners. It introduces several teaching strategies, such as using multimodal weekly announcements, offering flexible discussion formats (e.g., video, audio, text), encouraging peer-to-peer and instructor interactions through Q&A forums, and integrating creative activities that contribute to making learning both accessible and meaningful. As online education continues to evolve, ongoing course design informed by both UDL and andragogy will be significant to meet the needs of the increasingly diverse adult learner populations. Adult educators should engage in continuous reflective practice by regularly revising course design. Such ongoing refinement will help ensure that asynchronous online learning experiences remain responsive to adult learners' evolving learning needs and establish a supporting online learning environment for all learners.

References

Anthony, B., & Thomas, R. J. (2020). A meta-analysis of asynchronous online learning's effects on motivation, engagement, and academic achievement. *Journal of Educational Computing Research, 58*(4), 803-828.

Ausburn, L. J. (2004). Course design elements most valued by adult learners in blended online education environments: An American perspective. *Educational Media International*, *41*(4), 327-337. https://doi.org/10.1080/0952398042000314820

Borup, J., Graham, C. R., & Velasquez, A. (2011). The use of asynchronous video communication to improve instructor immediacy and social presence in a blended learning environment. In A. Kitchenham (Ed.), *Blended learning across disciplines: Models for implementation* (pp. 38–57). IGI Global

Bowers, J., & Kumar, P. (2015). Students' perceptions of teaching and social presence: A comparative analysis of face-to-face and online learning environments. *International Journal of Web-Based Learning and Teaching Technologies, 10*(1), 27–44. https://doi.org/10.4018/ijwltt.2015010103

CAST. (2011). *Universal Design for Learning Guidelines version 2.0*. Wakefield.

CAST. (2015). *Universal Design for Learning: Theory and practice*. Wakefield.

CAST. (2018). *Universal Design for Learning Guidelines version 2.2*. Wakefield.

Courey, S. J., Tappe, P., Siker, J., & LePage, P. (2013). Improved lesson planning with universal design for learning (UDL). *Teacher education and special education, 36*(1), 7-27. https://doi.org/10.1177/0888406412446178

Cui, G., Lockee, B., & Meng, C. (2013). Building modern online social presence: A review of social presence theory and its instructional design implications for future trends. *Education and information technologies, 18,* 661–685 (2013). https://doi.org/10.1007/s10639-012-9192-1

Hennessy, C., & Forrester, G. (2014). Developing a framework for effective audio feedback: a case study. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education, 39*(7), 777-789. https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2013.870530

Hrastinski, S. (2008). Asynchronous and synchronous e-learning: A study of asynchronous and synchronous e-learning methods discovered that each supports different purposes. *EDUCAUSE Quarterly, 31*(4), 51–55.Ice, P., Curtis, R., Phillips, P., & Wells, J. (2007). Using asynchronous audio feedback to enhance teaching presence and students' sense of community. *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks, 11*(2), 3-25.

Joulani, P., Gyorgy, A., & Szepesvári, C. (2013, May). Online learning under delayed feedback. In *International Conference on Machine Learning* (pp. 1453-1461). PMLR.

Knowles, M. (1984c). *The Adult Learner: A Neglected Species* (3rd Ed.). Houston, TX: Gulf Publishing.

Knowles, M. S. (1984a). *Andragogy in action: Applying modern principles of adult learning*. Jossey-Bass.

Knowles, M. S. (1984b). *Theory of andragogy. A Critique.* International Journal of Lifelong. Cambridge MA.

Kuo, Y. C., Walker, A. E., Schroder, K. E. E., & Belland, B. R. (2014). Interaction, internet self-efficacy, and self-regulated learning as predictors of student satisfaction in online education courses. *The Internet and Higher Education, 20*, 35–50. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.iheduc.2013.10.0

Lin, X. (2025). A preliminary study investigating adult learners' perspectives of using ChatGPT to seek effective assignment feedback. *The Australian Educational Researcher, 52*(5), 3393-3420. https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-025-00856-y

Lin, X., & Sun, Q. (2023). Student-generated memes as a way to facilitate online discussion for adult learners. *Psychology in the Schools, 60*(12), 4826-4840. https://doi.org/10.1002/pits.22884

Lin, X., Sun, Q., & Zhang, X. (2024). Increasing student online interactions: Applying the video timeline-anchored comment (VTC) tool to asynchronous online video discussions. *International Journal of Human–Computer Interaction, 40*(19), 5910-5922. https://doi.org/10.1080/10447318.2023.2247554

Lin, X., Zhao, T., Schmidt, S. W., & Zhou, S. (2025). Using AI as a learning tool through simulation interviews to enhance adult learning. *Adult Learning*, 10451595251345274. https://doi.org/10.1177/10451595251345274

Martin, F., & Bolliger, D. U. (2018). Engagement matters: Student perceptions on the importance of engagement strategies in the online learning environment. *Online Learning, 22*(1), 205-222. https://doi.org/10.24059/olj.v22i1.1092

Moore, M. (1993). Theory of transactional distance. In D. Keegan (Ed.), *Theoretical principles of distance education* (pp. 22-38). Routledge.

Narciss, S., & Huth, K. (2004). How to design informative tutoring feedback for multimedia learning. *Instructional design for multimedia learning*, 181195.

Park, J. H., & Choi, H. J. (2025). Adult learner dropout in online education in the post-pandemic era. *Encyclopedia, 5*(4), 214. https://doi.org/10.3390/ encyclopedia5040214

Petty, T., & Thomas, C. (2014). Approaches to a successful adult education program. *College Student Journal, 48*(3), 473-480.

Rogers-Shaw, C., Carr-Chellman, D. J., & Choi, J. (2018). Universal design for learning: Guidelines for accessible online instruction. *Adult learning, 29*(1), 20-31. https://doi.org/10.1177/1045159517735530

Rose, D. H., Harbour, W. S., Johnston, C. S., Daley, S. G., & Abarbanell, L. (2006). Universal design for learning in postsecondary education: Reflections on principles and their application. *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability, 19*, 135-151.

Rose, D. H., Meyer, A., & Hitchcock, C. (2005). *The universally designed classroom: Accessible curriculum and digital technologies.* Harvard Education Press.

Minghan Gao, a master's student at Teachers College, Columbia University, majoring in International Education Development. Her research interests focus on equity, social policy and public service, and international education policy.

Dr. Xi Lin is an associate professor in the Department of Interdisciplinary Professions at East Carolina University. Her research focuses on student engagement and interaction in online and distance learning and international students and faculty in the US higher education.

When Joy Becomes Resistance:

Mindfulness and Neuroscience as Pathways to Resilience in Higher Education

Yolanda Loften Sims

Abstract

Higher education environments are increasingly shaped by chronic stress, emotional labor, and systemic strain that impact teaching, learning, and meaningful engagement. Neuroscience demonstrates that prolonged stress disrupts cognitive functioning and limits connection. Drawing on neuroplasticity and Polyvagal Theory, this paper introduces the Sacred Pause as a structured, mindfulness-based intervention that interrupts stress reactivity and supports regulation, presence, and meaning-making. Through breath, reflection, and storytelling, this approach offers practical strategies for fostering resilience in academic spaces. Joy is reframed not as avoidance but as a deliberate, embodied response to chronic stress, supporting sustainable engagement and relational well-being.

Keywords: mindfulness, resilience, higher education, neuroscience, polyvagal theory

Introduction

Higher education environments are increasingly shaped by sustained pressure, emotional labor, and competing demands, leaving little space for restoration. These conditions influence not only productivity but also how individuals engage with teaching, learning, and relational connections. As stress becomes chronic, it begins to shape attention, decision-making, and the capacity to remain present in academic spaces.

Neuroscience provides a framework for understanding these patterns. Prolonged activation of stress responses narrows attention and disrupts relational engagement, impacting learning outcomes (LeDoux, 2016; Porges, 2017). At the same time, research in neuroplasticity suggests that the brain remains responsive to intentional, repeated experiences that support regulation and well-being (Davidson & McEwen, 2012). This understanding creates space to consider how intentional practices may support resilience and relational engagement within higher education environments.

This paper explores how mindfulness and neuroscience-informed practices, specifically the Sacred Pause, can support resilience in higher education. These approaches are particularly relevant within adult learning environments, where reflection, experience, and meaning-making are central. It also reframes joy as a deliberate and necessary response to chronic stress rather than a passive or incidental experience, particularly within spaces that often prioritize productivity over presence.

The Neuroscience of Stress and Learning

Stress activates the brain's survival systems, particularly the amygdala, which prepares the body to respond to perceived threat (LeDoux, 2016). While adaptive in short bursts, sustained activation suppresses the prefrontal cortex, reducing the capacity for reflection, reasoning, and learning. In academic environments, this may appear as difficulty concentrating, emotional reactivity, or reduced engagement.

Neuroscience-informed tools, such as the *3D Brain* (Society for Neuroscience, 2017), illustrate how these processes function within the brain. Understanding stress as a physiological response rather than a personal deficit shifts how educators and counselors interpret behavior. What may appear as disengagement is often a reflection of dysregulation. Recognizing this shift moves the conversation away from blame and toward greater compassion, awareness, and support within learning spaces. This perspective reinforces the importance of creating learning environments that support not only cognitive engagement but also nervous system regulation.

Polyvagal Theory and Regulation

Polyvagal Theory (Porges, 2017) offers a framework for understanding how the nervous system moves between states of regulation. These include a regulated state characterized by safety and connection, a mobilized state associated with fight-or-flight responses, and a shutdown state marked by withdrawal and disconnection. Studies indicate that learning and meaningful engagement are most accessible when individuals are in a regulated state (Porges, 2017). When stress is perceived, the nervous system shifts toward protection, which can limit attention and reduce engagement (LeDoux, 2016; Porges, 2017). Viewed through this lens, regulation is deeply linked to how individuals experience safety, connection, and learning in academic environments.

This framework invites educators and counselors to consider the role of physiological safety in learning environments. Supporting regulation becomes foundational to fostering meaningful connection and engagement in higher education.

Neuroplasticity and Intentional Practice

Neuroplasticity refers to the brain's ability to reorganize itself through repeated experience (Davidson & McEwen, 2012). Both stress and regulation can become conditioned patterns over time. Repeated exposure to stress can reinforce reactivity, while repeated engagement in regulatory practices can strengthen pathways associated with emotional regulation and cognitive flexibility. This perspective reinforces the idea that small, intentional practices can create meaningful shifts over time when integrated consistently into daily life.

This understanding highlights the importance of consistent, intentional practice. Rather than relying on isolated interventions, integrating small, repeated practices into daily academic routines can support meaningful and sustained change.

The Sacred Pause as Practice

The Sacred Pause is a structured practice designed to interrupt automatic stress responses and support purposeful regulation. It creates space between stimulus and response, allowing individuals to move from reactivity toward presence.

This practice is grounded in three interconnected elements that work together to support regulation, reflection, and connection. Breath-based techniques serve as an entry point for physiological regulation, gently guiding the nervous system toward a state of calm and stability. This may include a brief grounding breath before classroom discussion, reflective journaling following emotionally demanding dialogue, or intentional moments of silence that allow space for regulation and reflection.

Research on yogic breathing highlights its effectiveness in reducing stress and supporting overall well-being (Brown & Gerbarg, 2005). Reflective practices create space for meaning-making, inviting individuals to deepen awareness of their internal experiences with intention and curiosity. Storytelling extends this process into the relational space, fostering connection and reinforcing a sense of belonging within learning environments.

Somatic practices, such as gentle, repetitive touch, can further support regulation by signaling safety to the nervous system (Ruden, 2011). Together, these practices offer a practical, accessible approach to supporting resilience in higher education. Rather than functioning as isolated techniques, these practices work together to cultivate greater presence, connection, and emotional steadiness within academic spaces.

Joy as Resistance

Within this framework, joy is understood not as avoidance of stress but as an intentional response to it. Fredrickson's (2001) broaden-and-build theory suggests that positive emotional experiences expand cognitive and relational capacities, supporting resilience and engagement.

In relational contexts, such as education and counseling, cultivating connection and emotional presence aligns with principles of effective interpersonal engagement (Gottman & Gottman, 2015). These principles emphasize attunement, responsiveness, and emotional safety as essential components of meaningful interaction.

Within academic spaces shaped by urgency and emotional strain, intentional moments of pause can support both individual and collective well-being. In this sense, joy becomes a form of resistance, offering a practical and sustainable passageway to interrupt chronic stress patterns in learning environments. It resists chronic urgency, disconnection, and emotional depletion, while

supporting restoration and relational engagement in academic spaces. In many ways, this redefines resilience not as endurance alone, but as the intentional choice to remain connected to meaning, humanity, and hope amid ongoing demands.

Implications for Practice

Integrating mindfulness and neuroscience-informed practices into higher education offers practical and meaningful implications. These approaches support educator well-being, enhance student engagement, and foster environments grounded in presence and connection. These practices align with adult learning principles by emphasizing experiential engagement, reflection, and meaning-making. Importantly, these practices are accessible and adaptable. Small, intentional shifts, such as incorporating moments of pause, breath, and reflection, can create meaningful and sustainable changes in how individuals experience teaching and learning. These moments of intentional pause may seem simple, yet they can profoundly influence the emotional and relational climate in higher education environments.

Conclusion

Higher education continues to be shaped by chronic stress, influencing not only how individuals learn but also how they connect, engage, and remain present in academic spaces. Neuroscience offers insight into how these conditions shape attention and relational capacity, while also reminding us that the brain remains responsive to intentional, repeated experiences that support change and well-being (LeDoux, 2016; Davidson & McEwen, 2012). This offers a hopeful reminder that resilience can be intentionally cultivated through practices that support both regulation and connection.

Seen through this lens, the Sacred Pause offers a meaningful way to interrupt reactivity patterns and support resilience. Through consistent and intentional practice, individuals can begin to shift toward greater presence, flexibility, and engagement, within themselves and in connection with others.

Reframing joy as an intentional practice places it at the center of educational work. In this sense, joy is not separate from learning, but a vital pathway for sustaining it, supporting both individual well-being and the relational depth necessary for meaningful engagement in higher education.

References

Brown, R. P., & Gerbarg, P. L. (2005). Sudarshan Kriya yogic breathing in the treatment of stress, anxiety, and depression: Part II—Clinical applications and guidelines. *Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine, 11*(4), 711–717. https://doi.org/10.1089/acm.2005.11.711

Davidson, R. J., & McEwen, B. S. (2012). Social influences on neuroplasticity: Stress and interventions to promote well-being. *Nature Neuroscience, 15*(5), 689–695. https://doi.org/10.1038/nn.3093

Fredrickson, B. L. (2001). The role of positive emotions in positive psychology: The broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions. *American Psychologist, 56*(3), 218–226. https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.56.3.218

Gottman, J., & Gottman, J. (2015). *10 principles for doing effective couples therapy.* W. W. Norton & Company.

LeDoux, J. E. (2016). *Anxious: Using the brain to understand and treat fear and anxiety.* Penguin.

Porges, S. W. (2017). *The pocket guide to the polyvagal theory: The transformative power of feeling safe.* W. W. Norton & Company.

Ruden, R. A. (2011). *When the past is always present: Emotional traumatization, causes, and cures.* Routledge.

Society for Neuroscience. (2017). *3D Brain.* BrainFacts.org. https://www.brainfacts.org/3d-brain#intro=false&focus=Brain&zoom=false

Yolanda Loften Sims, M.Ed., RMHCI, is a doctoral candidate in Counselor Education and Supervision at National Louis University and a school counselor. Her work centers on mindfulness, neuroscience-informed practice, and strength-based, culturally responsive counseling. She is the creator of The Pause Project™, which supports resilience and presence among helping professionals. Her scholarship emphasizes positive aging, relational well-being, and equity for marginalized communities across the lifespan.

Cultivating Collegial Joy: Faculty Growth and Support in a Simple Hallway

Modupe Soremi, Connie Hudspeth, Grace Nasnas, Tamara Steffy, M.Ed, and E. Julie Edstrom

Abstract

This paper explores the extraordinary power of organic, sustained collegial support through the story of five higher education faculty who resided in “The 216 Hallway Suite.” Their journey of growth, covering everything from collaborative projects and presentations, to earning or enrolling in advanced degrees, will be examined. Learn how this intentional commitment to friendship, mentorship, and shared momentum has sustained their careers, mitigated isolation, and propelled their professional and personal growth over the years.

Keywords: *Faculty, Support, Mentorship*

The Rationale

The National Center for Faculty Development and Diversity (NCFDD, n.d.) explained that working in academia, while intellectually stimulating, is increasingly characterized by a profound sense of isolation. Research indicates that many faculty members find academic life significantly isolating. According to a study by *The Guardian*, 40% of academics identify workplace isolation as one of the primary factors negatively impacting their mental health (Shaw, 2014). Furthermore, 44% of respondents of the study cited a critical lack of support as a primary concern within their institutions. This isolation is often exacerbated for women faculty, who frequently balance "insurmountable responsibilities" that extend beyond the classroom, including the care of children and aging parents (Misra et al., 2011; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2012). For these educators, the lack of a structured support system can lead to professional burnout and a diminished sense of belonging (NCFDD, n.d.).

This case study examines how an intentional commitment to friendship, mentorship, and collective joy sustains academic careers and mitigates professional isolation. By analyzing a collaborative environment that operates independently of formal administrative hierarchies, this paper showcases an organic 'Micro-Community of Care.' Unlike top-down institutional programs that can feel performative, this model leverages the shared physical proximity of The 216 Hallway Suite to transform the workplace. The ultimate goal is to propose a model of 'collegial joy' in which intentional proximity and shared life experiences provide the stability necessary to thrive amid academic uncertainty.

This paper is the result of a collaboration of current and former faculty members who found their professional and personal voices within this shared hallway. It recounts a journey from the uncertainty of adjunct status to leadership roles within the college. Most significantly, this work is dedicated to the memory of Dr. Connie Hudspeth. As the senior member of our group, Connie

was the architect of our community, proactively reaching out to new faculty and welcoming us as peers and friends. Her unwavering belief in our collective potential, up until her final days, is the catalyst for this narrative and the heart of our shared story.

The 216 Hallway Suite

The physical setting for this journey is a single L-shaped hallway with offices 216A through 216J on a branch campus consisting of two buildings. On the surface, it is a standard academic wing, home to an adjunct workspace, a breakroom, and a lactation room. However, over the decades, this space was transformed into a "micro-community of care."

What began as a sterile corridor became a cozy, intentional home through the collective efforts of the faculty who passed through it. One professor added artwork to the walls; another donated a microwave; others brought plants and furniture. This joint effort turned a functional space into a sanctuary of collegial joy.

While many faculty and staff have transitioned through this hallway, advancing to new roles, retiring, or moving on. The five of us remained anchors in this space for decades. Representing a diverse range of departments including Math, Communication, and the Social Sciences. Four of us began our journey into higher education as adjunct instructors, balancing the demands of young families and reentering the workforce as professionals.

In this shared space, we built a profound support network that transcended traditional professional collaboration. Through intentional commitment to one another, we navigated the path from the uncertainty of adjunct status to tenured faculty status and current leadership roles, proving that when we support the "whole person," professional excellence naturally follows.

The Practice of "Organic Support"

While professional organizations often focus on formal mentorship, “The 216 Hallway Suite" utilized a radical practice we term "Organic Support." This mechanism recognizes that faculty members do not exist in a vacuum; their professional longevity is inextricably linked to their personal well-being and the unsurmountable responsibilities they carry outside the classroom.

The Radical Nature of "Life Support"

For our group, the most vital mechanism of our success was the practice of "life support." We define this as a radical commitment to sustained connection through shared life experiences. This was never a peripheral or social activity; it was a core professional necessity.

Life support functioned as the "safety net" that allowed us to navigate the heavy seasons of life (aging parents, personal health challenges, and the demands of parenthood) without withdrawing from our academic roles. By acknowledging that our personal well-being was inextricably linked

to our professional longevity, we turned our hallway into a sanctuary where we could remain present in our careers because we supported one another in our lives.

Intentional Moments of Joy

The implementation of life support requires intentional joy, which we describe as is the practice of carving out non-work-related time within the professional setting. These moments were vital in mitigating the feelings of isolation and burnout that often fuel faculty attrition. Concrete examples of this practice included:

- Breaking Bread: The commitment to sharing regular lunches served as a primary enabler for deep personal connection.
- Celebration of Milestones: We reclaimed professional space to celebrate personal victories, ranging from holiday parties and graduations to major life events like 50th birthdays.
- Natural Vulnerability: The hallway became a safe space to vent and laugh about the difficult moments of teaching and life, effectively diffusing high-stress situations before they led to exhaustion.
- Shared Rituals: Small traditions, such as "pizza competitions" or "game nights," reinforced the bond beyond typical work hours.

The Impact: Joy as Retention Work

This practice reframes emotional labor as retention work. By valuing the person behind the professor, the group created a *Micro-Community of Care* that fostered a growth mindset. This community ensured that no member had to "figure everything out" on their own, particularly during times of self-doubt. As a result, joy became a sustained presence in the hallway, proving that a thriving academic life grows from the understanding that you do not have to do this alone.

The Implementation

The transition from a standard workplace to a "Micro-Community of Care" was not accidental; it was the result of specific, repeatable behaviors that turned the hallway into an intervention. While the support was organic, its maintenance was highly intentional.

The Architecture of Proximity

The physical layout of The 216 Hallway Suite at the Altamonte Campus served as the initial enabler, but intentionality was the required fuel. We adopted a philosophy where the hallway was not just a passage to walk through, but a place to thrive and uplift. We utilized simple, low-cost environmental strategies to balance accessibility with professional focus:

- The "Open Door" Policy: We encouraged keeping office doors open during both student hours and general campus hours. This created a visual signal of availability and invited spontaneous "micro-mentoring" moments.
- Managing Boundaries: To protect deep work, we used environmental cues like "Recording in Progress" or "Student Meeting" signs. These allowed us to maintain professional rigor while remaining socially accessible.
- Sensory Anchors: Simple sensory anchors, brewing fresh coffee/tea, keeping a jar of cookies, a bowl of chocolates, or playing soft music, transforming sterile office spaces into welcoming hubs that encourage colleagues to pause and connect.

Strategic Reciprocity

Mentorship within the group was redefined as peer-to-peer solidarity rather than a top-down hierarchy. This "organic intentionality" was built on several practical habits:

- Proactive Outreach: Following the example set by the late Dr. Connie Hudspeth, we practiced “reaching out” rather than "waiting in." We made it a point to strike up conversations with new or quiet faculty members, ensuring no one remained in the "corner" of the hallway.
- Mutual Accountability: We transformed the hallway into a "Coaching Suite." We shared our professional goals, such as completing advanced degrees or submitting conference abstracts, and acted as one another’s accountability partners.
- Resource Sharing: This included reciprocal guest speaking arrangements and providing professional references or recommendations for one another. In addition, we were able to consult with one another regarding college policies and procedures without judgement but with compassion and helpfulness.
- Academic Peer Review: One of our most successful strategies was reciprocal editing. We reviewed each other's papers and presentation slides with a balance of rigorous academic guidance and genuine love. This helped mitigate the "imposter syndrome" often felt during doctoral journeys or when applying for high-stakes awards like the Endowed Teaching Chair or leadership positions.

The "Life Support" Schedule

To ensure these connections remained sustained, we integrated social support into our institutional routines:

- Scheduled Informal Time: We advocated for and protected time for regular lunches and non-work-related discussions.
- Institutional Presence: We made it a point to attend each other's campus initiatives, from student club presentations to tabling events and graduation ceremonies.
- Boundary Respect: While deeply connected, we remained respectful of each other's independent social and family networks, ensuring the group remained a source of support rather than an obligation.

By implementing these strategies, we transformed a physical hallway into a professional engine. This structure allowed us to maintain our "Life Support" commitments while simultaneously reaching the highest levels of professional achievement within the college system.

The Results

The effectiveness of The 216 Hallway Suite model is most evident in its role as a professional engine. By fostering a culture of collegial joy, the group transformed individual potential into collective achievement, proving that professional growth is a collective act.

Collective Professional Achievements

The support within the hallway fueled significant professional milestones that might have been more daunting in isolation. The results of this sustained partnership include:

- Collaborative Scholarship: The group has completed over 40 joint presentations and numerous collaborative service projects.
- Advanced Degrees: The hallway served as the launchpad for multiple doctoral journeys. The group now includes two doctorates, with two doctoral degrees underway.
- Institutional Recognition: Members have been recognized with four Endowed Teaching Chairs, with one currently in process. Notably, the group includes the 2025 AFC Professor of the Year for Florida.
- Leadership Roles: The support network propelled members into vital leadership positions, including the Director of Faculty Teaching and Learning (FCTL) and the Faculty Senate President.

The "Hallway Engine" in Practice

Beyond the accolades, the hallway provided a practical framework for navigating the practices of higher education institutions.

- Navigating Promotion and Tenure: The group acted as a support system for members navigating high-stakes professional milestones.
- Reciprocal Mentorship: Members engaged in reciprocal guest speaking arrangements and provided critical professional references and recommendations for one another.
- Mitigating Self-Doubt: The community provided a balance of "rigorous guidance and genuine love, offering “yes you can" when members faced self-doubt.
- A Safety Net for Persistence: One member noted that their doctoral journey ended in celebration because they were "never truly alone," surrounded by a community that corrected papers and cheered for every win.

Institutional Impact

This model challenges the standard academic narrative of solitary labor. By prioritizing joy and "life support," the group demonstrated that these informal networks are essential to faculty retention and well-being. The hallway was not just a space to survive; it became a space to thrive and uplift, ensuring a sustained presence in higher education for faculty and those managing complex lives.

The Conclusion

The story of "The 216 Hallway Suite" serves as a sustainable path forward in an era of professional uncertainty. A thriving academic life is not the result of working harder in isolation; it grows from connection, encouragement, and the understanding that you do not have to figure everything out on your own.

Transferable Lessons for Your Own Hallway

To replicate this model of collegial joy, the following strategies are recommended for faculty and institutions:

- Be Proactively Reciprocal: Building a network is not a passive process; it requires individuals to both initiate and receive support. Reach out to others, especially those outside your immediate department or senior rank.
- Institutionalize Informal Time: Promote and seek out informal time, such as regular lunches or coffee breaks, to foster trust. Small steps, like leaving an office door open or inviting a colleague to a campus event, can be the beginning of building trust for this type of mentoring relationship.

- Redefine Mentorship: Move away from formal, competitive mentorship toward a model of peer-to-peer solidarity. Be organically intentional about supporting one another's growth and life milestones.
- Value Emotional Labor: Institutions and individuals must acknowledge that "life support" is essential retention work. Professional support systems are most effective when they address the whole person, including the challenges of family, health, aging parents, and life outside of the institution.

A Call to Action

Our challenge to our colleagues is to use this story as an inspiration to make a difference in the lives of those around you.

Winston Churchill said, "We make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give."

Cultivating a powerful mentoring connection can be life-changing for the person you guide and equally transformative for you.

References

Jalilianhasanpour, R., Asadollahi, S., & Yousem, D. M. (2021). Creating joy in the workplace. *European Journal of Radiology*, 145, 110019.

Misra, J., Lundquist, J. H., Holmes, E., & Agiomavritis, A. (2011). The ivory ceiling of service work. Academe, 97(1), 22–26.

National Center for Faculty Development & Diversity (NCFDD). (n.d.). *The loneliness of academic life and how to break the cycle*. https://www.ncfdd.org/resources/the-loneliness-of-academic-life-and-how-to-break-the-cycle/

Shaw, C. (2014, May 8). Overworked and isolated - work pressure fuels mental illness in academia. *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/higher-education-network/blog/2014/may/08/work-pressure-fuels-academic-mental-illness-guardian-study-health

Ward, K., & Wolf-Wendel, L. (2012). Academic Motherhood: How Faculty Women Manage Work and Career. Rutgers University Press.

Dr. Modupe Soremi has taught Economics at Seminole State College since 2009. As a High-Impact Practices Ambassador, she champions undergraduate research and student engagement through initiatives like the Social Science Video Contest and Social Science Hour. A dedicated mentor and former club advisor, she focuses on adult education and fostering student achievement. She finds her greatest fulfillment in supporting student success both within the classroom and beyond.

Dr. Connie Hudspeth has been a Professor of Speech at Seminole State College since 2011, following eleven years at Rollins College. A distinguished educator, she received numerous honors, including the 2018 Endowed Teaching Chair and the National Teaching Effectiveness Award. She holds degrees from the University of Pittsburgh, West Virginia, and Ohio University. Beyond academia, Dr. Hudspeth was a dedicated community volunteer and an avid outdoor enthusiast.

Grace Nasnas was named the 2025 AFC Professor of the Year for her exceptional teaching and leadership. In fourteen years at Seminole State College, she has earned multiple honors, including the Endowed Teaching Chair Award. Recognized for transforming math education through innovation and student support, she also serves on various committees and the Foundation Board, all while pursuing her doctorate at Florida State University.

Tamara Steffy, M.Ed., serves as Director of the Faculty Center for Teaching and Learning at Seminole State College, where she leads institution-wide efforts to support faculty growth, connection, and teaching excellence. She fosters a culture of collaboration, innovation, and professional development, ensuring instructors have the tools and support to create transformative learning experiences. Her leadership has shaped faculty development programming, strengthened teaching practices, and advanced student and faculty success.

E. Julie Edstrom began her career in higher education as an adjunct mathematics professor in 2008. Teaching is her passion; math is her subject of choice. She is currently the Faculty Senate president at Seminole State College. Her involvement runs deep, giving presentations, serving on numerous committees, and being recognized as an Endowed Teaching Chair in 2024.

In Memoriam: Dr. Connie Hudspeth, the Architect of Our Joy

This work is dedicated to the memory of our friend and mentor, Dr. Connie Hudspeth (1964-2026), whose tireless advocacy and unwavering support proved that collegial joy is not a luxury, but a legacy. The ultimate testament to this life-support system is the enduring legacy of Dr. Connie Hudspeth. As a confident, experienced veteran, Connie was the heartbeat of our hallway. From the moment each of us arrived, she treated us as true peers and friends, proactively stopping by our offices to check on our teaching and share her vast knowledge and strength.

Even in her final days, her dedication to our collective growth never wavered. While we respect her academic achievements and the PhD she held, we honor her most for being the architect of the collegial joy that continues to sustain us today.

Dr. Hudspeth passed away on January 21, 2026, just five weeks before we stood on the national stage at AHEA to present this paper. We carry her spirit with us, grateful for the foundation of mentorship and friendship she so selflessly built.

Uncovering Resilience: Encountering Students in Higher Education with Mental Health Concerns

Shantreirra Monroe

Abstract

Higher education professionals (HEPs) from non-mental health backgrounds encounter student challenges ranging from academic and social stressors related to attending college to more serious mental health concerns. These difficulties have included substance abuse, the risk of suicide, and a range of emotional concerns. The literature asserts that when students' present with an increase in severity of emotional concerns, HEPs may be at risk for compassion fatigue or burnout. However, despite such challenges, including operational disruptions, many have demonstrated resilience within their roles. Through the intentional actions and determination of HEPs have been the leading source of their resilience.

Keywords**:** Mental health, college students, resilience

Introduction

The prevalence of students experiencing some form of mental health concerns while attending college has increased nationally over the past few decades (Nelson, 2019; Preece et al., 2005; Rosenbaum & Liebert, 2015). The spectrum of mental health concerns observed among students encompasses issues both associated with the college experience and those that arise independently of it. Subsequently, several factors may negatively impact a student's ability to succeed in college (El-Monshed et al., 2021). Over the past few decades, college students have reported experiencing mental health and wellness problems more than ever before (Anderson, 2016, p. 7). Anxiety and depression remain the most commonly reported mental health conditions among college students, with statistics indicating that up to 75% of diagnosable mental health concerns emerge by age 24 (NAMI, n.d.b).

In response to the critical needs of today's college students, higher education institutions are reassessing the effectiveness of the services they provide within college settings (Zarges et al., 2018). Challenges experienced by HEPs stem from overwhelming mental health concerns presented by students, which could trigger secondary traumatic stress, also referred to as compassion fatigue, burnout, or vicarious trauma (Preston et al., 2022). This occurs when professionals in their respective roles across disciplines are frequently exposed to the emotional stressors of others (Inbar & Shiri, 2021). Existing literature indicates that advisors often receive limited formal preparation to manage mental health–related encounters (Wenham et al., 2020; Lomax, 2019).

Professionals' experience, training, and competency level are significant in tackling emerging challenges experienced by college students. In the past, mental health was viewed as controversial, and some stigma still exists, which contributes to only one-third of college students accessing the resources available on campus. Mental health concerns are now gaining widespread attention as their severity increases, making college students an at-risk population (El-Monshed et al., 2021). As mentioned, these challenges have forced higher education administrators to adjust services and respond accordingly (Schlesselman et al., 2020).

Holland and Wheeler (2016) conducted a study on student stress and mental health, predicting that students with mental health needs would not access mental health counseling services due to stigma and poor coping mechanisms. Student stress levels are presented to HEPs in various ways, including through mental health counseling departments, academic advisors, and administrative support staff (McAllister

et al., 2014). This differs from the past, where students who reported being overwhelmed with academic demands were not inclined to access counseling resources on campus (Holland & Wheeler, 2016). As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic's emergence, wellness issues gained increased attention, especially with respect to emotional health (Chao & Fan, 2021; Son et al., 2020). The onset of COVID-19 was first noted in the later part of 2019, which ultimately triggered a global pandemic in March 2022.

Theoretical Framework

Transition theory, introduced by Nancy Schlossberg in the early 1980s, addresses major shifts such as a student being accepted and attending college. Attending college signifies a life transition, often starting in adulthood. Students begin to develop and grow as they consider or change their career path. The theory asserts that life transitions may trigger frustrations based on the transition from one phase to the next (Schlossberg, 1981). Transition types are described as situations or events that are anticipated, unanticipated, or non-events. Examples of anticipated transitions may consist of progressing in a specified degree program or even graduation. Unanticipated situations may involve stress-provoking occurrences such as relationships ending, financial change, or a loss. Non-events refer to transitions that were anticipated but failed to happen; this could be related to personal goals. The transition represents a change that occurs, which, according to the research, may be experienced in different ways (Eunyoung, 2012). Transition theory is relevant as HEPs encounter students who experience changes while attending college. Equally, HEPs encounter transitions in their role that may include major changes related to role expectations in supporting students to operational disruptions such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Higher Education Institutions

Students encountering mental health concerns are exposed to interruptions in their education, which also may have a negative impact financially on the student and institution (Heisserer & Parette, 2002). The following literature review will discuss the role of HEPs and the challenges they may encounter within the context of student support services, including being on the front line for cultivating connections for students.

Higher Education Professionals

The field of academic affairs has conceptually been concerned with the academic success of students, such as their journey to a degree (Loes et al., 2024; Museus, 2021). Hence, HEPs, specifically academic advisors, have assisted with outlining learning outcomes for students and promoting retention (Museus, 2021; Zarges et al., 2018). College can be viewed as an overwhelming and intricate environment for incoming students as they must learn to adapt. Academic advisors are responsible for students' needs as they acclimate to their academic responsibilities, which may include navigating resources for success, maintaining academic rigor, or encouraging students to engage in their college journey (Yenney, 2020). Despite the consensus pertaining to its extreme pressures in academia, there are positive sentiments regarding the profession. As such, a study concluded that those on the frontline would benefit from continuous professional development, specifically addressing high-risk populations or complex situations (Wenham et al., 2020).

As mental health concerns surface, higher education institutions must demonstrate the ability to ensure best practices and resources are in place to support student needs. Best practice strategies, according to The National Association of Student Personnel Administrator's policy and practice series, should include continuous policy and procedural updates, which include an array of supports built into the campus environment (Wesley, 2019). Schlesselman et al. (2020) suggest that being engaged in the revision of strategies and developmental programming assists with addressing potential stressors and strengthens students' ability to be resilient. They also contribute to how schools can help students cope during significant events. Though most students' needs were met within the institution, others requiring more specialized care were handled offsite.

As described previously, many professionals are portrayed as being exposed to pressures, subjecting them to emotional vulnerabilities. The concept of compassion fatigue refers to when professionals exhibit stress brought on by the trauma recounted to them by other individuals. As such, this has been seen within educational settings. Other concepts related to compassion fatigue are burnout, secondary trauma, and compassion satisfaction (Inbar & Shiri, 2021). Burnout is explained as prolonged stress and frustration resulting from substantial work demands. Yang (2021) suggests secondary trauma, also referred to as secondary traumatic stress (STS), is a result of witnessing trauma in another person. Additionally, it has been suggested that these stressors can be balanced by compassion satisfaction, which is the belief that an individual

can receive gratification through observing the progress made by those the individual supports (Johnson, 2020).

Moreover, another approach to managing burnout, which is currently gaining momentum in society and among researchers, is self-care. Self-care has become popularized in recent years as a healthy way to improve one's ability to manage life challenges. This involves addressing overall well-being in areas including spirituality, mental health, interpersonal relationships, and physical needs (Burelison et al., 2021). Although the definition of self-care varies, it concentrates on awareness of one's needs and the tenacity to maintain self-regulation while working toward ultimate health and well-being. According to Martínez et al. (2021), the concept of self-care was emphasized during the COVID-19 pandemic. A study conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic by Indiana University-Purdue titled "Help Us, Help Students" assessed an area of work-life balance, specifically, the use of self-care activities to prevent burnout and cope with stressors. The results found physical activity, nutritious eating habits, and intermissions to their workday are valuable in maintaining well-being. Other activities listed included meditation, listening to music, reading, appropriate rest, and fresh air; these areas increased following the pandemic (Burelison et al., 2021).

The above-mentioned self-care activities are valued as institutions learn of the challenges experienced by students during COVID-19. Even the return-to-work procedures of institutions were discussed at length as administrators considered HEPs feedback on returning to work following the pandemic shutdowns. Participants in the study recommended the integration of schedules with the availability of working from home and in the office, as well as improved work-life balance (Burelison et al., 2021).

Prevalence of Mental Health Concerns

In the United States, each year, it is estimated that 1 in 5 adults encounter a mental health challenge (National Alliance on Mental Illness [NAMI], 2022b; Rens et al., 2022). Also, 1 in 20 encountered a severe mental health challenge (NAMI, n.d.b). Additional statistics indicated that a mental illness is diagnosed by age 14 in 50% of cases and by age 24 in 75%. In 2020, data indicate that over 52 million people experienced mental illness (NAMI, n.d.b). In recent years, the conceptualization of health has evolved to include overall well-being. According to Anderson (2016, p. 4), "Health is a state of complete positive physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity

Impact of Mental Health Concerns

Mental health concerns often lead to a disturbance in academic progress; a range of concerns has the potential to negatively impact student success rates (Son et al., 2020). Furthermore, the literature asserts that the frequency and magnitude of stressors experienced by college students

may impact academic performance. Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, 82% of students surveyed by Son et al. (2020) expressed concern related to academics.

Wesley (2019) indicated that 60% of students responded that they experienced anxiety, and 40% reported being impacted by depression. The research noted that depression may adversely affect students' academic progress. This was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic with nearly 14 million college students throughout North America encountered ramifications, including campus shutdowns, transitioning to remote learning, and limited access to campus-operated services such as counseling resources (Daigle, 2021).

Methodology

"Drawing on Husserl's transcendental phenomenology, Moustakas illustrated a systematic approach to analyze phenomenological data with a focus on searching for a composite description of a phenomenon that captures the meanings and the essence of experiences" (Liao et al., 2021, p. 3). In relation to discovering resilience while navigating the challenges encountered supporting students in higher education, Moustakas' phenomenology was selected to explain the significance of how HEPs conceptualize their experiences (Liao et al., 2021). Miles et al. (2014) assert that phenomenology extracts themes from the data collected from participants.

Prior to moving forward with this study, approval was received through the Internal Review Board (IRB) to ensure confidentiality, privacy, and the upholding of the rights of the participants. Following the IRB approval, participants who responded to the recruitment emails and met the study requirements engaged in an interview; and followed up to confirm the captured information. and discontinue participation in the study at any point.

Findings

HEPs experienced an insurmountable number of challenges, which encompassed the mental health needs of students, limited formal training in mental health for non–mental health providers, and major global events impacting operations, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. HEPs' shared experiences depicted the concept of resilience. Resilience was demonstrated in various ways, including HEPs learning about on- and off-campus resources to support student mental health, independently accessing mental health trainings, leveraging skills developed through personal and professional experiences to assist students, and recognizing self-care practices that enhance their well-being while encountering stress-related situations within higher education institutions. HEPs have built resilience through growing confidence in speaking about mental health; however, stigma continues to loom.

Conclusion

The services HEPs provide to students across campuses and various institutional settings are invaluable, given their intricate backgrounds and career experiences. They engage with students

who have diverse and increasingly complex needs and backgrounds. However, access to mental health training tailored to non–mental health professionals, such as academic advisors, remains limited. Based on this research and the existing literature, HEPs would benefit from formalized, comprehensive mental health training, as well as clear onboarding standards that include ongoing reminders and strategies throughout the year. Additionally, in recognition of the extensive and varied backgrounds of students accessing higher education, more integrative measures should be considered to support mental health, particularly when services are limited or unavailable on campus.

Recommendations

Recommendations include, first, implementing a comprehensive onboarding process and annual updates for HEPs that are conducive to supporting student mental health from a non–mental health provider perspective. Second, institutions should establish and incorporate best practices for the use of technology as a standard enhancement to support the work of HEPs, limit disruption, and enhance flexibility in connections. Lastly, wellness and self-care opportunities for frontline professionals should be integrated to reduce the occurrence of secondary traumatic stress, compassion fatigue, and burnout.

References

Anderson, D. S. (2016). *Wellness issues for higher education: A guide for student affairs and higher education professionals*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Burelison, A.H., Rust, M., Chaille, M., Huff, A. F., Crist, M., Klosterman, G., (2021). Help us, help students: Supporting advisors during COVID-19. *SPA Journal at IU*. 98-107.

Chao, B., & Fan, J. (2021). Study on mental health problems and countermeasures of college students under the background of epidemic prevention and control. *Psychiatria Danubina*,*33* (4), 646 650. http://doi.org/10.24869/psyd.2021.646

Daigle., L., Hancock, K., & Chafin, T. (2021). COVID and its link to victimization among college students. *American Journal of Criminal Justice, 46*, 683-703.

Davis, K., Nishar, S., Acosta, J., Howdershelt, M., Rhodes, J., Cleetus, A., Renke, B. (2021). Supporting College Students: Mental Health and Disability in Higher Education. Mental Health America.

El-Monshed, A. H., Fayed, S. M., & Loutfy, A. (2021). Prevention and treatment of mental health and psychosocial problems in college students. *Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice, 28*(3), 250–253. https://doi.org/10.1037/cps0000040

Eunyoung, K. (2012). An alternative theoretical model: examining psychosocial identity development of international students in the United States. *College Student Journal, 46*(1), 99–113. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ991173

Heisserer, D., & Parette, P. (2002). Advising at-risk students in college and university settings. *College student journal, 36*(1), 69-83.

Holland, D., & Wheeler, H. (2016). College student stress and mental health: Examination of stigmatic views on mental health counseling. *Michigan Sociological Review, 40* (1), 16-43.

Inbar, L., & Shiri, S.-A. (2021). Managing the emotional aspects of compassion fatigue among teachers in Israel: a qualitative study. *Journal of Education for Teaching, 47*(4), 562-575.).

Johnson, M. M. (2020). Self-Care: The antidote to compassion fatigue. *Educational Leadership, 78*(2), 46–51.

Loes, C. N., An, B. P., & Trolian, T. L. (2024). Quality of student–faculty interactions, persistence, and the mediating role of student satisfaction. *Journal of Postsecondary Student Success*.

Martínez, N., Connelly, C. D, Pérez, A., Calero P. (2021). Self-care: A concept analysis. *International Journal Nurse Science, 8*(4), 418-425. doi: 10.1016/j.ijnss.2021.08.007

McAllister, M., Wynaden, D., Happell, B., Flynn, T., Walters, V., Duggan, R., Byrne, L.,

Heslop, L., and Gaskin, C., (2014). Staff experiences of providing support to students who are managing mental health challenges: A qualitative study from two Australian universities. *Advances In Mental Health, 12*(3), 192-201.

Miles, M., Huberman, M., & Saldaña, J. (2014). *Qualitative Data Analysis: a methods Sourcebook* (3 ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Moustakas, C. (1994). Phenomenological research methods. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Museus, S. D. (2021). Revisiting the Role of Academic Advising in Equitably Serving Diverse College Students. *NACADA Journal*, *41*(1), 26–32.

National Alliance on Mental Illness (n.d.a). *LGBTQI*. NAMI. Retrieved September 21st, 2022, from https://www.nami.org/Your-Journey/Identity-and-Cultural-Dimensions/LGBTQI.

National Alliance on Mental Illness (n.d.b). *Mental health by the numbers*. NAMI. Retrieved August 4th, 2022, from https://www.nami.org/mhstats.

Nelson, K.L. (2019). Mental health and advising on the college campus. *Journal of Mental Health Social Behavior, 101* (1), 1-4. https://doi.org/10.33790/jmhsb1100101

Preece, J. E., Beecher, M. E., Martinelli, E. A., Roberts, N. L. (2005). Students with emotional disabilities: Responding to Advisors' Concerns and Questions. *NACADA Journal, 25*(1), 42-46.

Preston, P. J., Sanchez, D., & Johnson, K. S. (2022). Exploring mindful self-care as a potential mediator between compassion satisfaction and compassion fatigue among student services professionals. *Trauma Care, 2*(4), 535–549.

Rens, E., Michielsen, J., Dom, G., Remmen, R., & Van den Broeck, K. (2022). Clinically assessed and perceived unmet mental health needs, health care use and barriers to care for mental health problems in a Belgian general population sample. *BMC Psychiatry, 22*(1), 1–13. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12888-022-04094-9

Rosenbaum, P. J., & Liebert, H. (2015). Reframing the conversation on college student mental health. *Journal of College Student Psychotherapy*, *29*(3), 179-196. doi:10.1080/87568225.2015.1045780

Schlesselman, L. S., Cain, J., & DiVall, M. (2020). Improving and Restoring the Well-being and Resilience of Pharmacy Students during a Pandemic. *American journal of pharmaceutical education*, *84*(6), ajpe8144. https://doi.org/10.5688/ajpe8144

Schlossberg, N. K. (1981). A model for analyzing human adaptation to transition. *The*

Counseling Psychologist, 9(2), 2–18. https://doi.org/10.1177/001100008100900202

Schlossberg N. K., Waters E. B., & Goodman, J. (1995). Counseling adults in transition: Linking practice with theory. (2nd ed.). New York: Springer.

Son, C., Hegde, S., Smith, A., Wang, X., & Sasangohar, F. (2020). Effects of COVID-19 on college students' mental health in the United States: Interview survey study. *Journal of medical Internet research, 22*(9), e21279. https://doi.org/10.2196/21279

Wenham, K., Valencia-Forrester, F., & Backhaus, B. (2020) Make or break: the role and support needs of academic advisors in work-integrated learning courses, *Higher Education Research & Development, 39* (5), 1026-1039, doi: 10.1080/07294360.2019.1705254

Wesley, A., (2019). Strategies for addressing mental health support on campus. *NASPA-Policy and Practice Series.(4).* 1-12.

Yang, C. (2021). Online teaching self-efficacy, social–emotional Learning (SEL) competencies, and compassion fatigue among educators during the COVID-19 pandemic. *School Psychology Review, 50*(4), 505–518. https://doi.org/10.1080/2372966X.2021.1903815

Yenney, C. B. (2020). “I Trusted Her More Than I Trusted Myself”: The impact of academic advising on rural students’ sense of belonging in college. *New Directions for Student Services*, *2020*, 29–36. https://doi.org/10.1002/ss.20362

Zarges, K. M., Adams, T. A., Higgins, E. M., & Muhovich, N. (2018). Assessing the impact of academic advising: Current issues and future trends. *New Directions for Higher Education*, *2018*(184), 47–57. https://doi.org/10.1002/he.20302

Shantreirra Monroe, PhD, LCSW is an Assistant Professor of Social Work and Director for the Office of Professional and Clinical Practice at Barry University. Dr. Monroe has nearly 20 years of experience in supportive services throughout the lifespan. She is a dedicated educator and mental health provider who approaches her work from a strength-based and trauma informed lens.

Joy Through Reflection:

Using ePortfolios and Storytelling to Foster Leadership Identity in Adult Learners

Jennifer Enderlin

Abstract

Reflection is often framed as an academic requirement rather than a meaningful learning practice. However, structured reflection can help adult learners connect academic concepts to lived experience and develop leadership identity. This paper explores the use of reflection, storytelling, and ePortfolios in leadership and professional communication courses. Drawing on findings from a qualitative case study, the paper illustrates how reflection strengthens self-awareness, leadership confidence, and motivation to lead. When learners engage in meaning-making through reflection, they begin to recognize patterns of growth and leadership capacity. Rather than diminishing rigor, reflection deepens learning by helping students interpret experience and understand who they are becoming as leaders.

Keywords: reflection, leadership identity development, adult learning, ePortfolios, storytelling

Introduction

Adult learners frequently bring extensive professional and personal experiences into the classroom. e experiences often shape how they interpret leadership concepts, workplace communication, and organizational dynamics. However, traditional academic assignments do not always create space for learners to examine how these experiences influence their understanding of leadershipThes. As a result, students may complete coursework without fully integrating their lived experiences with the theoretical frameworks they encounter in class.

Reflection offers one way to bridge this gap between experience and academic learning. Experiential learning theory suggests that individuals learn most effectively when they have opportunities to reflect on their experiences and interpret their meaning (Kolb, 2014). Through reflective practice, learners move beyond simply completing tasks and instead begin to analyze how their actions, decisions, and interactions contribute to learning. In professional contexts, reflection is also recognized as an important component of effective practice, allowing individuals to evaluate their experiences and continuously improve their work (Schön, 1983).

Within leadership education, reflection serves an additional purpose by supporting the development of leadership identity. Leadership development is not limited to acquiring knowledge about leadership theories; it also involves understanding oneself as someone capable of leading others. Scholars have noted that leader identity develops through a process of self-reflection and experience as individuals interpret their actions and interactions within leadership

contexts (Day & Harrison, 2007). When students reflect on their experiences through the lens of leadership theory, they often begin to recognize leadership behaviors they already demonstrate in their workplaces, families, and communities.

Findings from my qualitative case study of a university leadership development program suggest that structured opportunities for reflection allow students to reinterpret their experiences in ways that strengthen their understanding of leadership and their confidence in their ability to lead. Participants frequently described moments of recognition in which they began to see themselves as leaders within their workplaces and communities (Enderlin, 2024).

This paper explores how reflective practices, particularly through storytelling and ePortfolio development, can support leadership identity development among adult learners. Drawing on findings from a qualitative case study of a university leadership development program, the paper examines how reflection contributes to increased self-awareness, leadership self-efficacy, and motivation to lead. These findings highlight how reflective learning practices can deepen engagement and foster meaningful learning experiences for students in leadership and professional studies programs (Enderlin, 2024). The discussion first considers the role of reflection in adult learning, followed by an examination of leadership identity development and the role of reflective practices such as ePortfolios and storytelling in supporting meaningful learning experiences.

Reflection and Adult Learning

Reflection has long been recognized as a central component of adult learning. Experiential learning theory suggests that individuals learn through a cyclical process that includes experience, reflection, conceptualization, and application (Kolb, 2014). Reflection also plays an important role in transformative learning, where individuals critically examine their experiences and assumptions in order to develop new perspectives (Mezirow, 1997).

Professional education has also emphasized the importance of reflective practice. Schön (1983) argued that professionals develop expertise by reflecting on their actions and considering how their decisions influence outcomes. This reflective process allows individuals to adapt their behavior and refine their understanding of complex situations. In leadership contexts, reflection can help individuals evaluate their communication, decision-making, and interactions with others. Research suggests that leadership development interventions can influence key leadership capacities, including self-awareness and self-regulation, further supporting the role of reflection in leadership development (Krampitz et al., 2021).

For adult learners, reflection can be particularly valuable because it encourages them to connect academic concepts to their own experiences. Many students in leadership and professional studies programs are already working professionals who bring real-world challenges into the

classroom. Reflective assignments allow these learners to examine how leadership theories appear in practice and how their experiences align with or challenge those theories.

When reflection is integrated intentionally into coursework, it can move beyond simple journaling or assignment completion. Instead, reflection becomes a tool for meaning-making, allowing learners to reinterpret their experiences and develop deeper insights about leadership, communication, and professional growth.

Leader Identity Development and Motivation to Lead

Leadership development programs often aim to do more than teach leadership theories or management techniques. A central goal of many programs is to help students develop a leader identity—an understanding of themselves as individuals who are capable of influencing others and contributing to organizational or community outcomes. Leader identity development is an ongoing process that evolves as individuals interpret their experiences and receive feedback from others (Day & Harrison, 2007; Komives et al., 2005; Liu et al., 2021).

My dissertation research examined this process through a qualitative case study of a university leadership development program. The study explored how participation in the program influenced students' motivation to lead and their perceptions of effective leadership. Motivation to lead has been defined as an individual difference that influences a person's willingness to assume leadership roles, persist in leadership efforts, and engage in leadership development, and it can develop over time through experience, reflection, and participation in leadership-related activities (Badura et al., 2020; Chan & Drasgow, 2001). Participants frequently described increased self-awareness as one of the most significant outcomes of their educational experience. Through coursework, discussion, and reflection, students reported gaining a clearer understanding of their leadership strengths, limitations, and values (Enderlin, 2024).

Many participants also described increased confidence in their ability to lead. Students often entered the program with a narrow understanding of leadership that emphasized formal authority or positional power. Over time, their understanding expanded to include relational aspects of leadership such as collaboration, mentorship, and communication. As participants reflected on their leadership experiences, they began to recognize how their actions influenced others within their organizations.

For example, one participant described how reflecting on workplace experiences helped them recognize the influence they already had within their team:

"I felt like I was one of the better leaders. Everybody wanted to actually come work in my department. They wanted to work for me… She wanted me to teach her how to build the skills because her other manager really didn't take an interest in helping her" (Enderlin, 2024).

This reflection illustrates how participants began to reinterpret past experiences as evidence of leadership capability. Situations that may have previously been viewed simply as part of their job responsibilities were reframed as meaningful leadership experiences.

Another participant described how their motivation to lead was connected to a desire to collaborate and support others within their professional environment:

"At least if I get my own agency, I can work with other agencies as a team. Our help is needed" (Enderlin, 2024).

Statements such as these reflect how participants connected leadership with service, collaboration, and responsibility toward others. Rather than viewing leadership solely as authority or position, participants increasingly framed leadership as the ability to influence outcomes and support collective goals.

These reflections demonstrate the connection between leadership identity and motivation to lead. As individuals begin to see themselves as capable leaders, they often become more willing to pursue leadership opportunities and responsibilities. Reflection played a key role in this process by helping participants reinterpret their experiences and recognize the leadership behaviors they were already demonstrating in their professional contexts (Enderlin, 2024).

ePortfolios as Reflective Learning Spaces

One instructional approach that supports reflective learning is the use of ePortfolios. Unlike traditional assignments that are completed once and submitted for evaluation, ePortfolios allow students to curate artifacts of their learning over time. These artifacts may include written assignments, presentations, workplace projects, and other evidence that demonstrates the development of professional and leadership competencies.

The reflective component of ePortfolio development encourages students to examine how these artifacts represent their learning and growth. Rather than viewing assignments as isolated tasks, students begin to see connections between different learning experiences. This process helps learners construct a narrative of their development as professionals and leaders.

Research suggests that ePortfolios can support integrative learning by encouraging students to connect academic coursework with real-world experiences (Eynon & Gambino, 2017). For adult learners in leadership programs, this integration is particularly meaningful because many students are simultaneously applying course concepts in their workplaces. Reflective ePortfolio assignments provide an opportunity for students to analyze how leadership theories and communication practices appear in real organizational contexts.

Students frequently report that reviewing earlier artifacts within their ePortfolios helps them recognize how their thinking has evolved over time. These moments of reflection often reveal shifts in perspective, new insights about leadership, and increased confidence in their abilities.

As learners recognize their growth, they begin to view leadership development as an ongoing journey rather than a single academic requirement.

Storytelling, Reflection, and Meaning-Making

Storytelling plays an important role in reflective learning because it allows individuals to organize experiences into meaningful narratives. When students reflect on their experiences through storytelling, they are not simply recounting events (Schön, 1983). Instead, they are interpreting those events and considering how their actions influenced outcomes. Through this process, learners often discover insights about leadership, communication, and decision-making that might otherwise remain unnoticed.

In leadership education, storytelling helps students connect theoretical concepts to real-world situations. For example, when discussing leadership styles, conflict management, or ethical decision-making, students often recall experiences from their workplaces where these concepts were relevant. Revisiting these experiences allows learners to analyze how leadership behaviors influence relationships, team dynamics, and organizational outcomes.

Participants in my dissertation study frequently described revisiting past experiences through a leadership lens. Situations that once seemed routine were reinterpreted as moments of leadership learning. Through reflection and discussion, students began to recognize how their actions had influenced others and contributed to team or organizational outcomes. These realizations often strengthened their confidence and deepened their understanding of leadership (Enderlin, 2024).

For many adult learners, storytelling also provides an opportunity to validate experiences that may not have previously been recognized as leadership. Through reflection, learners often realize that leadership can occur in many contexts and does not require a formal title. This recognition can be empowering and can strengthen both leadership identity and motivation to lead.

Joy as a Companion to Rigor

Discussions of academic rigor often emphasize intellectual challenge and discipline. While these elements are important, meaningful learning experiences also include moments of discovery, pride, and personal growth. For many adult learners, these moments happen when they begin to recognize how their experiences have shaped their understanding of leadership.

Reflective practices such as storytelling and ePortfolio development can create opportunities for these moments of discovery. When students revisit earlier work and recognize improvements in their thinking or communication, they often experience a sense of accomplishment. These realizations reinforce their commitment to learning and encourage continued engagement with leadership development.

Joy in learning does not diminish academic rigor. Instead, it can enhance engagement by helping students see the relevance of their education to their personal and professional lives. When

learners recognize how course concepts apply to their experiences, they are more likely to invest effort in understanding and applying those ideas.

For educators, incorporating reflection into coursework can create space for these meaningful learning experiences. When students are encouraged to examine their growth and articulate their learning, they begin to see education as a process of discovery rather than simply a series of assignments. In these moments, joy emerges as a natural companion to rigorous learning.

Conclusion

Leadership development is not solely about learning theories or acquiring technical skills. It also involves the process of understanding oneself as a leader and recognizing one's ability to influence others. Reflection plays a central role in this process by helping learners make sense of their experiences and connect them to leadership concepts.

Through structured reflection, storytelling, and ePortfolio development, students can develop greater self-awareness, leadership confidence, and motivation to lead. Findings from my case study research suggest that leadership education programs can play an important role in fostering these outcomes by creating opportunities for meaningful reflection and discussion (Enderlin, 2024).

When educators intentionally design learning experiences that encourage reflection, they help students move beyond completing assignments and toward deeper engagement with their learning. In this process, learners often begin to recognize their leadership potential and the value of their experiences. This doesn't require a complete redesign of a course, but it does require more intentional questions.

Ultimately, reflection allows students to see their educational experiences as part of a broader process of leadership development. As learners interpret their experiences and recognize patterns of growth, they often begin to view themselves as individuals capable of influencing others and contributing to their organizations and communities. For many adult learners, these moments of recognition are powerful because they validate experiences that may have previously gone unexamined. In this way, reflection becomes more than an academic exercise—it becomes a process through which learners construct meaning, develop confidence, and recognize their leadership potential. When thoughtfully integrated into leadership education, reflective practices create opportunities for students to engage deeply with their learning while rediscovering both purpose and joy in the process.

References

Badura, K. L., Grijalva, E., Galvin, B. M., Owens, B. P., & Joseph, D. L. (2020). Motivation to lead: A meta-analysis and distal-proximal model of motivation and leadership. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 105*(4), 331-354. http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/apl0000439

Chan, K. Y., & Drasgow, F. (2001). Toward a theory of individual differences and leadership: Understanding the motivation to lead. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 86*(3), 481–498. https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.86.3.481

Day, D. V., & Harrison, M. M. (2007). A multilevel, identity-based approach to leadership development. *Human Resource Management Review, 17*(4), 360–373. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.hrmr.2007.08.007

Enderlin, J. (2024). *How are they developing as leaders? A university leadership development program case study* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Central Arkansas).

Eynon, B., & Gambino, L. M. (2017). *High-impact ePortfolio practice: A catalyst for student, faculty, and institutional learning.* Stylus Publishing.

Kolb, D. A. (2014). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development* (2nd ed.). Pearson Education.

Komives, S. R., Owen, J. E., Longerbeam, S., Mainella, F., & Osteen, L. (2005). Developing a leadership identity: A grounded theory. *Journal of College Student Development, 46*(6), 593–611. https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2005.0061

Krampitz, J., Seubert, C., Furtner, M., & Glaser, J. (2021). Self-leadership: A meta-analytic review of intervention effects on leaders' capacities. *Journal of Leadership Studies*, *15*(3), 21-39.

Liu, Z., Venkatesh, S., Murphy, S. E., & Riggio, R. E. (2021). Leader development across the lifespan: A dynamic experiences-grounded approach. *The Leadership Quarterly*, *32*(5), 101382.

Mezirow, J. (1997). Transformative learning: Theory to practice. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education, 74*, 5–12.

Schön, D. A. (1983). *The reflective practitioner: How professionals think in action.* Basic Books.

Jennifer Enderlin, PhD, is a faculty member in Organizational Studies at Arkansas Tech University. Her research focuses on leadership identity development, adult learning, and reflective practice in higher education. She teaches courses in professional communication, workplace supervision, and leadership, with an emphasis on helping students connect academic learning to lived experience.

Learned Leadership: Social and Ethical Components of Sorority Leadership Development

Olivia Rowe and Jeremy Schwehm

Abstract

This study examines how collegiate women in performative sorority environments develop ethical leadership skills through observation and modeling. Using a concurrent mixed-methods approach comprising a Likert-scale questionnaire and semi-structured interviews with active sorority members, the research investigates the prevalence of Light Triad traits (Kantianism, humanism, faith in humanity) versus Dark Triad traits (Machiavellianism, psychopathy, narcissism). Findings demonstrate that while informal peer observation primarily fosters Light Triad behaviors, the insular organizational environment also creates susceptibilities to Dark Triad tendencies, particularly favoritism. The study shows that higher education professionals must implement structured, intentional leadership development programs to cultivate ethical decision-making and sustainable practices among emerging sorority leaders.

***Keywords**:* Sorority Leadership, Social Learning Theory, Ethical Leadership, Light Triad, Dark Triad.

Introduction

Collegiate sororities operate in highly visible, performative environments where leaders make critical choices regarding ethical behavior. Young women face the intense pressure of public performance while simultaneously attempting to develop their personal leadership philosophies. National headlines frequently highlight the catastrophic failures of Greek Life leadership (CBS News, 2024; Hutchinson, 2026; Langford, 2026; Letoi, 2025), showcasing instances of hazing, negligence, and unethical decision-making that yield disastrous consequences for students. The persistent problems have led students on some campuses to call for the abolishment of Greek Life organizations altogether (Stewart, 2020). These failures directly call into question the internal mechanisms organizations use to foster moral growth and ethical governance.

Despite organizational missions prioritizing scholarship, civic engagement, and leadership, formal leadership development within sororities remains scarce (Pearlman et al., 2023). National Panhellenic Conference (NPC) organizations typically reserve structured leadership academies exclusively for a small handful of executive officers, leaving the broader chapter body without formal training. This training deficit creates a fertile environment for unethical behaviors to take root, particularly when contention arises between executive leaders and general members. Because the organization lacks formal curriculum, younger members learn leadership skills informally by observing the public performances of their elected peers. Therefore, this study seeks to determine whether women within the performative environment of a sorority chapter

develop leadership skills aligned with the Light Triad or the Dark Triad of ethical traits through observation and behavioral modeling.

Literature Review

Social Learning Theory

Albert Bandura established Social Learning Theory by demonstrating that individuals learn behaviors through observing models within social conditions (Bandura & Walters, 1977). The theory outlines several sequential stages: attention, retention, reproduction, motivation, vicarious reinforcement, and self-efficacy. For a behavior to successfully transfer to an observer, the model must first command attention through attraction, interest, or charisma. In a sorority setting, emerging leaders carefully watch older members holding positions of power. When these younger members observe a leader successfully utilizing a behavior (and subsequently receiving rewards or avoiding consequences) they retain the memory of that action and attempt to reproduce it. Through continuous rehearsal and vicarious reinforcement, the observer builds self-efficacy and permanently adopts the behavior (Bandura, 1978; Horsburgh & Ippolito, 2018). As sorority members internalize observed behaviors of sorority leadership, it becomes important to examine how modeled leadership behaviors align with ethical leadership frameworks, particularly the influences of light and dark triad personality traits.

Ethical Leadership: The Light and Dark Triads

Leadership traits fall broadly into two ethical spectrums: the light triad and the dark triad. Ethical leaders build rapport and foster organizational commitment by serving as value-driven role models. The light triad encompasses Kantianism, humanism, and faith in humanity (Kaufman et al., 2019). Kantianism directs individuals to treat people as ends in themselves rather than means to an end. Humanism recognizes individual dignity and inherent worth. Faith in humanity relies on the optimistic assumption that people possess innate goodness. Leaders embodying these traits focus on people, utilize collaborative working styles, and pursue self-transcendent values.

Conversely, the dark triad consists of Machiavellianism, psychopathy, and narcissism (Kay, 2022; Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Machiavellian leaders eagerly utilize manipulative tactics, endorse cynical views of human nature, and act amorally to secure power (Dahling et al., 2009). Narcissistic leaders display grandiosity, self-absorption, and fragile self-esteem, while psychopathic individuals lack empathy and employ charm or manipulation to achieve their goals (Leong et al., 2025; Rosenthal & Pittinsky, 2006; Wisse, Sleebos, & Keller, 2024). While ethical behavior and leadership can be defined by the internalization of light or dark triad personality traits, it is through outwardly performed behaviors that these traits are reinforced.

Performative Leadership in Sororities

Leadership inherently requires performance (Peck et al., 2019; Ropo & Salovaara, 2019), particularly when leaders must rally followers, convey a united front, or construct a compelling organizational vision. Researchers situate leadership as a practice rooted in speech and interactive presentation (Aritz et al., 2017; Clifton, Larsson, & Schnurr, 2020). Sorority members exist within an intersection of collegiate rules, organizational bylaws, and social hierarchies. Consequently, they engage in performative leadership to manage their audience, consisting of both external campus peers and internal chapter members. The behaviors they choose to perform publicly heavily influence the ethical culture of the organization (Bernardin-Jatoft, 2024; Sasso et al., 2024), determining whether the chapter normalizes light or dark triad characteristics.

Methodology

Study Design and Participants

The researcher implemented a concurrent, mixed-methods design to gather qualitative and quantitative data simultaneously. The Institutional Review Board at Arkansas Tech University and the National Panhellenic Conference provided formal approval before the investigator initiated data collection. The investigator utilized a non-probability convenience sample, recruiting women aged 18 to 24 who held active memberships in NPC sororities at a southern regional university. The final sample consisted of six participants representing three different sorority organizations. Participant classifications included one sophomore, one junior, three seniors, and one graduate student. Collectively, these six women held 18 distinct leadership positions, ranging from committee members to chapter presidents.

Instrumentation and Data Collection

The investigator distributed an online questionnaire comprising 35 Likert-scale questions via QuestionPro. The survey measured participants' agreement with statements regarding ethical leadership development, placing answers on a six-point scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The questions systematically targeted Bandura’s stages of social learning theory to evaluate how participants observed and replicated behaviors. Furthermore, the investigator conducted semi-structured interviews via Webex with four of the participants. The interviews contained open-ended questions designed to extract nuanced qualitative data regarding the participants' personal leadership philosophies, their observations of authentic versus performative behaviors, and their experiences with ethical dilemmas. The investigator analyzed the qualitative transcriptions thematically, isolating concepts related to social learning, authenticity, and the two ethical triads.

Limitations

The limitations of this study include the small sample size and the restricted regional scope, as the participants exclusively represented southern sorority cultures. Additionally, the convenience sampling method introduces self-selection bias. Participants may also exhibit self-reporting bias,

potentially altering their answers to preserve their own reputations or protect the image of their respective organizations.

Results

Evidence of Social Learning

Both the quantitative survey and the qualitative interviews yielded robust evidence supporting the presence of social learning within the sorority chapters. Participants demonstrated strong cognitive awareness of their leaders' behaviors. Fifty percent of respondents strongly agreed that they intentionally observed and clearly identified leadership elements when watching their peers. During the interviews, participants explicitly credited their older sorority mentors for shaping their leadership styles. One participant, Eloise, noted that she gravitated toward leaders she admired, intentionally surrounding herself with them to emulate their success. Similarly, Hannah attributed her eventual presidency to observing a past president who consistently prioritized the chapter's best interests.

The data confirms that admiration directly fuels the reproduction of behaviors. Eighty-three percent of survey participants strongly agreed that admiring a leader increased their motivation to replicate that leader's actions. When observing positive behaviors succeeding, participants felt confident in their ability to perform the same behaviors.

Authenticity and Performative Environments

The highly visible nature of sorority life frequently forces members to project specific images, complicating authentic leadership. Survey responses highlighted a strong internal conflict regarding performativity. When asked if sorority leaders project an image about making a difference even when they do not feel they are actually making one, 50% agreed and 16.67% somewhat agreed. Similarly, 50% of participants agreed that certain situations require leaders to project a false image.

Interviewees provided context for these performative contortions. Participants explained that recruitment events and formal chapter meetings demand a "united front" from executive boards, even when the leaders experience internal disagreements. Eloise reported that young members often struggle to maintain these performative fronts while navigating their genuine identities, particularly during high-stress recruitment periods.

Ethical Leadership Development: The Light and Dark Triads

When evaluating ethical frameworks, participants overwhelmingly reported adopting Light Triad traits. All six participants stated that they actively promote the well-being of others in their leadership roles, and the majority indicated they place the needs of the sorority above their personal desires. Alley, a senior participant, demonstrated profound humanism by voluntarily stepping down from future positions to allow younger members the opportunity to lead.

However, participants also reported distinct encounters with Dark Triad behaviors. While no participants admitted to manipulating others or seeking unfair advantages, they recognized negative traits operating within their chapters. Hannah explicitly identified favoritism as a toxic element within her organization, noting that leaders frequently awarded prestigious opportunities to members they knew personally rather than evaluating candidates fairly. Elaine expressed profound frustration with leaders who shielded their close friends from facing consequences for violating organizational bylaws. These unchecked biases foster environments where unethical, Machiavellian tendencies can thrive.

Discussion

The results of this study validate Astin's (1996) assertion that collegiate students learn leadership fundamentally through peer interactions. Within the decentralized, self-governing structure of a sorority chapter, younger members treat executive officers as primary behavioral models. Similar to studies on leadership development in agile environments (Kaletta & Reuther, 2021), the findings indicate that women within these performative environments predominantly develop leadership skills situated within the light triad. By prioritizing organizational sustainability, demonstrating empathy, and attempting to inspire their peers, these emerging leaders operate from a baseline of humanism and faith in humanity.

Despite these positive outcomes, the performative environment clearly exposes members to dark triad susceptibilities, especially in competitive or high-pressure contexts (Kaletta & Reuther, 2021). Because sorority culture places immense pressure on members to maintain flawless public images and achieve recruitment quotas, leaders occasionally compromise their authenticity. More concerningly, the informal nature of their leadership development can allow destructive behaviors like bias and favoritism to propagate (McCready et al., 20205; Pearlman et al., 2023). When a chapter president uses her positional power to protect a friend from disciplinary action, observing members internalize that unethical behavior as an acceptable leadership tactic. The total absence of consequences acts as a vicarious reinforcement, subtly shifting the chapter culture toward Machiavellianism.

Because organized leadership training remains exclusively reserved for top executives, general members lack the formal educational frameworks necessary to identify and combat these cognitive biases. Therefore, participants recognized the detrimental effects of favoritism but expressed feelings of powerlessness to correct the behavior within the existing hierarchical structure.

Conclusion

Collegiate sororities provide highly unique, complex platforms for organizational leadership development. This research demonstrates that while young women in sororities naturally gravitate toward ethical, Light Triad leadership styles through positive social learning, they

remain highly vulnerable to the structural pitfalls of informal peer observation. To protect the organizational health of these chapters and sustainably foster ethical leadership, higher education professionals and national sorority organizations must overhaul their training paradigms. Organizations must implement comprehensive, intentional leadership transition programs that educate all members—not just executive officers—on implicit bias, ethical decision-making, and conflict resolution. Future research should expand this inquiry to include larger sample sizes, non-officer perspectives, and fraternity populations to determine the broader applicability of these findings across diverse collegiate environments. By acknowledging the intense performative pressures placed upon these young women, institutions can better equip them to lead authentically and ethically.

References

Aritz, J., Walker, R., Cardon, P., & Li, Z. (2017). Discourse of leadership: The power of questions in organizational decision making. *International Journal of Business Communication, 54*(2), 161–181. https://doi.org/10.1177/2329488416687054

Astin, A. W. (1996). Involvement in learning revisited: Lessons we have learned. *Journal of College Student Development, 37*(2), 123–134.

Bandura, A. (1978). Reflections on self-efficacy. *Advances in Behaviour Research and Therapy, 1*(4), 237–269. https://doi.org/10.1016/0146-6402(78)90012-7

Bandura, A., & Walters, R. H. (1977). *Social learning theory*. Prentice Hall.

Bernardin-Jatoft, K. M. (2024). *Performative DEI, minimization of race, and privilege: Framing Panhellenic sorority leaders' perspectives on racial discrimination* (Doctoral dissertation, University of North Georgia). Ubiquity Repositories. https://ir.ung.edu/works/publication-dissertation/3gxvg-0hy62

CBS News. (2024). Dartmouth sorority, 2 members of fraternity face charges after student who went to party drowned. https://www.cbsnews.com/news/dartmouth-sorority-members-face-charges-student-drowned/

Clifton, J., Larsson, M., & Schnurr, S. (2020). Leadership in interaction: An introduction to the special issue. *Leadership, 16*(5), 511–521. https://doi.org/10.1177/1742715020954790

Dahling, J. J., Whitaker, B. G., & Levy, P. E. (2009). The development and validation of a new Machiavellianism scale. *Journal of Management, 35*(2), 219–257. https://doi.org/10.1177/0149206308318618

Horsburgh, J., & Ippolito, K. (2018). A skill to be worked at: Using social learning theory to explore the process of learning from role models in clinical settings. *BMC Medical Education, 18*(1), Article 156. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12909-018-1251-x

Hutchinson, B. (2026). 3 Arizona fraternity leaders arrested on hazing charges following death of 18-year-old pledge. *ABC News*. https://abcnews.com/US/3-arizona-fraternity-leaders-arrested-hazing-charges-death/story?id=129757115

Kaletta, J., & Reuther, K. (2021). *Dark triad versus light triad: A comparison and analysis in the context of agile leadership*. Academic Conferences International Limited.

Kaufman, S. B., Yaden, D. B., Hyde, E., & Tsukayama, E. (2019). The light vs. dark triad of personality: Contrasting two very different profiles of human nature. *Frontiers in Psychology, 10*, 467. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.00467

Kay, C. S. (2022). Animal house: The dark triad traits and membership in sororities and fraternities. *Acta Psychologica, 222*, Article 103473. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.actpsy.2021.103473

Langford, S. (2026). Fraternity hazing crisis: Deadly incidents and charges persist despite new US law. *Academic Jobs*. https://www.academicjobs.com/higher-education-news/fraternity-hazing-crisis-deadly-incidents-charges-persist-despite-new-us-law-7389

Leong, M.K., Mehmood, K., Ishrat, K., Ali, H., & Sadiq, M. (2025). Grandiose narcissism, leadership, and workplace deviance: Does self-interest always breed toxicity in leadership roles? *BMC Psychology,*13(963). https://doi.org/10.1177/15480518241247113

Letoi, T. (2025). Former sorority member speaks out after CSUSM chapter revoked over hazing allegations. *10 News San Diego*. https://www.10news.com/news/local-news/former-sorority-member-speaks-out-after-csusm-chapter-revoked-over-hazing-allegations

McCready, A. M., Duran, A., Goodman, M. A., & Selznick, B. S. (2025). A quantitative analysis of organizational conformity in sororities and fraternities: Analyses on "fitting in." *Journal of Sorority and Fraternity Life Research and Practice, 20*(1), 66–92. https://journal.libraries.wm.edu/jsflrp/article/view/986/

Paulhus, D. L., & Williams, K. M. (2002). The dark triad of personality: Narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy. *Journal of Research in Personality, 36*(6), 556–563. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0092-6566(02)00505-6

Pearlman, B., Sasso, P. A., Smith, H., & Pulliam, M. (2023). Not "slated" for leadership: Barriers and unclear leadership development pathways in Panhellenic sorority members. *Journal of Campus Activities Practice and Scholarship, 5*(1), 24–39. https://doi.org/10.52499/2023005

Peck, E., Freeman, T., Six, P., & Dickinson, H. (2009). Performing leadership: Towards a new research agenda in leadership studies? *Leadership, 5*(1), 25–40. https://doi.org/10.1177/1742715008098308

Ropo, A., & Salovaara, P. (2019). Spacing leadership as an embodied and performative process. *Leadership, 15*(4), 461–479. https://doi.org/10.1177/1742715018768707

Rosenthal, S. A., & Pittinsky, T. L. (2006). Narcissistic leadership. *The Leadership Quarterly, 17*(6), 617–633. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2006.10.005

Sasso, P. A., Bullington, K. E., & Bidinger, M. (2024). Sisterhood and authenticity: The experiences of Generation Z sorority women in National Panhellenic Council (NPC) chapters. *New York Journal of Student Affairs, 24*(1). https://commons.library.stonybrook.edu/nyjsa/vol24/iss1/4

Stewart, M. (2020). The “abolish Greek life” movement calls for an end to toxic fraternity, sorority culture. *Insight Into Academia*. https://insightintoacademia.com/the-abolish-greek-life-movement-calls-for-an-end-to-toxic-fraternity-sorority-culture/

Wisse, B., Sleebos, E., & Keller, A. (2024). The mask of sanity? Leader primary psychopathy and the effects of leader emotion regulation strategies on followers. *Journal of Leadership & Organizational Studies*, 31(2), 146-165. https://doi.org/10.1177/15480518241247113

Olivia Rowe, MA, is the Transfer Coordinator in the Office of Admissions at Arkansas Tech University. This is her first research endeavor, and continues to look for ways to further her experience in the realm of women's leadership development.

Jeremy Schwehm, Ph.D., is a Professor of Organizational Studies and Director of the Master of Arts in Organizational Leadership and Learning at Arkansas Tech University. His research interests include prosocial leadership development, adult learner engagement, and experiential learning in the online environment.

"Place Matters:" Adult Educators' Roles with Local Leaders in Transforming Mineral-Rich Communities in Ghana

Isaac Kofi Biney

Abstract

This paper explores the roles of adult educators in transforming mineral-rich communities in Ghana, which appear unsustainable due to illegal mining activities, colloquially referred to as 'galamsey.' Galamsey is an illegal process of gathering mineral resources, particularly gold, for sale. Adult educators serve as a resource in communities and can help the citizenry use advocacy to fight the galamsey menace. Adult educators can employ facilitation, change-agent, and animation roles to energize group learning with local leadership groups in light of threats posed to forest vegetation cover, water bodies, and the citizenry. Polluted water bodies and degraded forest vegetation cover have significant livelihood implications for the sustainability of mineral-rich communities in Ghana.

Keywords: adult education, community development, galamsey, Ghana, sustainability

Introduction

Globally, countries blessed with natural resources use them for development. Norway has invested its oil revenues in long-term funds, improving quality of life for current and future generations, where daily life becomes more predictable and stable (Sperton, 2023). Thus, citizenry enjoys profound positive effects on their health, social, economic, and environmental outcomes (Brown & Baker, 2019).

In Africa, South Africa (SA) has utilized resources from gold and platinum, making SA a developed economy. Angola uses crude petroleum and diamond revenues to revamp its devastated economy following prolonged internal conflict. Ghana has large gold deposits across 14 of 16 regions, though "an illegal process of gathering mineral resources, particularly gold, for sale" has led to 'galamsey' (Biney, 2019, p. 435). These activities have destroyed water bodies, forest vegetation cover, and fertile arable lands. Galamsey in Ghana increased from 5,256.9 hectares in 2021 to 8,923.8 hectares as of the end of 2024 (Forestry Commission Research, 2026), destroying cocoa farms and creating health-related, social, security and environmental challenges in Ghana (Darkwa, 2025).

This paper aims to define adult educators' roles in working with local leaders in mineral-rich communities in conscientizing the citizenry and making mineral-rich communities sustainable. Galamsey has become a national security issue. Militarization of illegal mining represents a serious challenge to state authority (Darkwa, 2025), and armed non-state authority actors are increasingly seizing control of resource-rich areas (Darkwa, 2026). Cocoa farms are being destroyed, and farmers are compelled to sell to the illegal miners, causing destabilization.

Strategies deployed by the GoG, including the use of a military code-named *'National Anti-Illegal Mining Operations Secretariat'* (NAIMOS), to safeguard the forest reserves from illegal miners have failed. The documentary, *"A Tax for Galamsey: The Extortion Racket Fueling Illegal Mining,"* revealed that, of the 184 forest reserves in Ghana, about 44 of them have been invaded by illegal miners. The connivance of some district assembly officials and police personnel makes it easy for illegal miners to bribe their way into illegal mining. Corruption in illegal mining is at its apex (Biney, 2019). Meanwhile, the Minerals and Mining Act (2006) prohibits companies from entering and mining in the forest reserves.

Yet adult educators serve as an educational force in communities. The work of adult educators demands creative approaches to building *relationships* and *galvanizing* local leaders.

Health, Environmental, and Social Challenges Posed by Galamsey on Communities

Galamsey is making it difficult for the Ghana Water Company (GWCL) to purify the water with chlorine for consumption by the citizenry in our communities. According to GWCL, several major desilting works are regularly carried out at many reservoirs and pumping stations. Even more damning are the heavy metals in the water, consumed by people; cyanide and mercury are used to extract the gold ore from sand. For example, the harmful effects on pregnant women are unimaginable. Children are born without fingers, toes, and many malformations. Many people also die from cancer-related ailments, thus making illegal mining truly an existential threat to the citizenry. Lack of urgency shown in the fight against illegal mining will cost the country's environment and citizenry. Figure 1 illustrates this phenomenon.

Fig. 1. Galamsey threatened shutdowns

Environmental damage results in the destruction of fertile arable lands and forests. Removing trees has affected weather patterns, considering climate change. Water sources are blocked and polluted, and the vulnerable poor are not responsible. As Bokpin (2026) expressed, “the cost is clearly higher than whatever benefit is being advertised” (Bokpin, 2026, p. 1). These environmental impacts also threaten farming. Haynes (2025) cited ‘Ayanfuri,’ as simultaneous regulated and unregulated mining activities. Unfortunately, unregulated mining has deforested hills, polluted environments (i.e. the Offin River), and harmed quality of life and survival.

Galamsey is more than an environmental crime. It is a struggle for survival, shaped by poverty, unemployment and the lure of gold (Haynes, 2025). It is about the greed of a select few over the masses (Biney, 2023). The galamsey menace is a story of conflicting interests involving the GoG, mining companies, traditional leaders, and ordinary citizens (Haynes, 2025). Whatever it is, many of the local community members in Ghana are farmers, and the galamsey menace is undermining their livelihoods. As Figure 2 depicts, there seems not to be any hope in sight.

Fig. 2. Trading classrooms for pits: The high cost of galamsey (Credit: hotfmghana.com)

The devastating spread of galamsey is also a profound moral and spiritual failing fueling a public health disaster (Haynes, 2025). Some citizens are a bottom-up pressure driving galamsey, while GoG, mining companies, and some traditional leaders, based on their roles, are top-down forces prolonging, spreading, and exploiting galamsey for personal and corporate gains. The price of gold hit an all-time high in 2025, around USD $4,379 to USD $4,381 per ounce in October and has held strong since December 2025, due to geopolitical uncertainty, strong central bank buying of gold and a weaker USD (Haynes, 2025). Some earnings are being made in the short term from gold, but the question is: to what end?

Policy, Security, and Political Challenges Posed by Illegal Mining

There is also the issue of security following countless reports of clashes between the ‘galamseyers’ and Ghana’s security personnel. Aside from the burning of bulldozers, excavators, chauffing and other pieces of equipment, the illegal miners sometimes exchange fire with the security personnel, resulting in needless deaths. Some of the galamseyers are foreigners, particularly Chinese nationals, and people from the neighboring West African States who are partners of the local faceless investors in the illegal mining. Additionally, when illegal miners are arrested, many foreign nationals are not tried in a competent court of jurisdiction but are

repatriated to their home countries. This inequality raises the question of discrimination and injustice to Ghanaians, who are often tried and jailed.

There is also a political twist to the ‘galamsey’ menace, which has contributed to the deterioration of mineral-rich communities. Whenever there is a new government in power, its supporters seize some of the mining concessions of the members of the previous government and mine them (Darkwa, 2025). This deleterious mindset is not helping in the fight against illegal mining in the mineral-rich communities in Ghana but intensifies the operations of illegal mining.

Antwi (2025) added another dimension to the effect of illegal mining in the mineral-rich communities in Ghana, stating that the classroom is under siege. Learners are abandoning classrooms, teachers are fleeing, and the country’s human capital is being eroded. According to Antwi (2025), there is a cold war between gold and education in Ghana. Ghana must remember that gold is a robber industry; for with time, the gold resources may become exhausted, and the disused pits must be reclaimed, and land regenerated. The prosperity of a nation lies not in the gold beneath its soil but in the minds of its educated citizens, and there remains sufficient room for the role of adult educators to serve the citizenry in learning and becoming empowered to take control of their communities (Antwi, 2025).

Adult Educators and Local Community Leaders' Roles in Curbing Illegal Mining

Adult educators and local community leaders can work together to deploy advocacy, change agents, and animators to fight illegal mining in their communities. Adult educators and community leaders must intensify their advocacy via local and national media platforms. They should speak strongly about the effects of illegal mining on not only the environment and waterbodies, but also on the education of students and the livelihoods of the citizenry. Such advocacy should be made regularly to attract the attention of the GoG and the international community for support to wage a relentless war and win the fight against galamsey in mineral-rich communities in Ghana.

Earthworks did this for mining-affected communities. Earthworks (2025) asserted that when local leaders stand in solidarity with communities fighting mining injustice, and in some cases, fighting mining projects that are not wanted, they win the fight. Local community organizations can also be encouraged by adult educators and local leaders to garner support within communities and fight ‘galamsey’ in the mineral-rich communities in Ghana.

Adult educators and local leaders should stand with communities. After all, adult educators work at the intersection of many different systems, often serving communities furthest from power (Right Question Institute, 2026). Furthermore, adult educators should work *with* community leaders and members, but should not decide to undertake such an important project of community development (CD) work alone, as it involves being knowledgeable about the community history and culture, and organizations operating in the community.

Alas, adult educators are usually outsiders helping to bring about improvement in communities, but community leaders are from within the communities and know their community culture better than the adult educators do. As adult educators work collaboratively with local community leaders and members, they can engender a successful fight against 'galamsey', ensuring the well-being and sustainable development of communities in Ghana.

Adult educators work *with* local leaders as change agents (Brookfield, 1995; Sousa, 2021), and that calls for the adoption of participatory working approaches *with* not only the local leaders but also the entire community members. This approach can help local leaders and community members to learn and become conscientized. In so doing, the community members will seek their development and that of their communities. The local people can ascertain the state in which they find themselves in their communities and participate in community projects that could lead to addressing the 'galamsey' menace.

Note et al. (2021) asserted that the field of adult education refers to educating adults; hence, adult educators work *with* local leaders and community members, via the facilitating roles that they play to aid the citizenry to learn in their communities about the best ways to improve lives, livelihoods, and foster sustainable development of their communities.

Adult educators can also serve as animators as they work with local leaders and community members to take total control over their communities. As animators, adult educators are the source of education in the communities (Biney, 2025; Biney, 2022) and do provide unique educational services to the citizenry by putting together some images so that the impression of movement is achieved (Freire, 2018). As community members learn to breathe life into their communities, an avenue is created amongst the citizenry to seize the opportunity based on the unimaginable damage that illegal mining continues to inflict on their communities and seek their rights and the protection of mineral-rich mining communities in Ghana.

However, for the deployment of animation to be successful in regaining the mineral-rich communities to their former status, adult educators must work with people of experience in the communities. Boud and Miller (1996) asserted that animation can be described as a function of working *with* the experience of others. This suggests that wise counsel and community wisdom provided by local leaders and innovative ideas shared by opinion leaders in the mineral-rich communities can culminate in galvanizing the local leaders and citizenry to seek their rights.

Implications for Adult Education and Community Development

Health-related issues and social and environmental challenges posed by illegal mining to the citizenry in mineral-rich communities seem insurmountable. Environmental damage, with its consequential climate change effects, is a sign of destruction. Place matters, and as Brown and Baker (2019) indicated, places where people live have profound effects on their health, social, economic, and environmental outcomes. People's lives are threatened, and if efforts are not made, such communities could become ghost towns. These very reasons make it imperative that both the GoG and citizenry wake up from their slumber, roll up their sleeves, and work with adult educators to redeem their communities.

Security issues surrounding illegal mining must be tackled to make mineral-rich communities sustainable. This is more critical now than ever because Ghana is experiencing needless deaths of young adults from this unwarranted galamsey menace.

Adult educators and community leaders in mineral-rich communities can work in unison for the establishment of *group learning* in our communities. Group learning will allow a citizenry to become critically aware and support people in protecting and sustaining their communities. Group learning must be encouraged in Ghanaian communities to the point where every community member becomes empowered. When local leaders and community members work together, it becomes important to win the fight against galamsey. Imel (1997) and Vella (2018) observed that community members learn largely via groups, and this approach to learning must be encouraged amongst community members by local leaders in Ghanaian communities. That is a sure path for community members to become empowered to take control of their communities and improve them.

The GoG must garner the political will to fight the ‘galamsey’ menace properly. This means that jobs are created for young, able-bodied men and women to work and move out from the galamsey sites. The GoG job-creation policy must be one of partnering with the private sector players to create sustainable alternative livelihood programs, but not to become interested in the short-term gains and revenue that the GoG is garnering from gold procured from small-scale illegal miners. The long-term repercussions seem devastating, and the GoG must act fast to save the forest vegetation cover and the major rivers and waterbodies from dying out completely.

Conclusion

This paper explored adult educators and local leaders' roles in transforming the mineral-rich communities in Ghana. Three areas examined include (1) health, environmental and social challenges posed by illegal mining to the citizenry and the GoG, (2) policy, security and political challenges posed by illegal mining, and (3) adult educators and local community leaders' roles in curbing illegal mining. The galamsey menace has become an existential threat to the citizenry of Ghana. Security in galamsey communities cannot be guaranteed. Major waterbodies in Ghana are drying out. Forests are under threat. Local leaders have a lot to do to save their communities from extinction.

Adult educators must deploy facilitation, change agents and animation roles in working *with* local leaders to save mineral-rich communities from becoming ghost towns. This means that learning groups are established in every community in Ghana. Community members are to be encouraged and supported to learn in groups in their communities. In so doing, many mineral-rich communities could be transformed and become vibrant, thriving, and sustainable in Ghana.

References

Antwi, I. N. (2025). *Gold versus education: The silent war in mining communities*. LinkedIn. https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/gold-versus-education-silent-war-mining-communities-nyarko-antwi-plxle

Biney, I. K. (2019). Exploring the power of the media in promoting lifelong learning and popular mobilization drive against 'galamsey' in Ghana. *Australian Journal of Adult Learning, 59*(3), 435–467.

Biney, I. K. (2022). Revitalizing self-help spirit in the communities: Are there roles for adult educators to play? *Community Development, 53*(3), 326–344. https://doi.org/10.1080/15575330.2021.2019071

Biney, I. K. (2023). "It is not working for them but with them": Adult educators' roles with community groups in transforming communities. *Adult Learning, 35*(3), 1–11. https://doi.org/10.1177/10451595231201361

Biney, I. K. (2025). Unpacking lifelong learning and entrepreneurial prospects among young adults in Ghana. *Community Development, 56*(1), 103–124. https://doi.org/10.1080/15575330.2024.2392577

Bokpin, G. A. (2025). *The fight against illegal mining is woefully inadequate*. MyJoyOnline. https://www.myjoyonline.com/fight-against-illegal-mining-woefully-inadequate-prof-bokpin/

Bokpin, G. A. (2026). *Ghana is heading into danger*. Ghanaian Chronicle. https://ghheadlines.com/agency/ghanaian-chronicle/20260205/169971846/ghana-is-heading-into-danger-prof-bokpin

Boud, D., & Miller, N. (1996). *Working with experience: Animating learning*. Routledge.

Brookfield, S. D. (1995). *Adult learners, adult education and the community* (5th ed.). Open University Press.

Brown, M. E., & Baker, L. (2019). "People first": Factors that promote or inhibit community transformation. *Community Development, 50*(3), 297–314. https://doi.org/10.1080/15575330.2019

Darkwa, S. K. (2025). Ghana's ticking time bomb: Why illegal mining has become a national security crisis. *Daily Graphic*, p. 17.

Earthworks. (2025). *Fighting mining injustice*. https://earthworks.org/campaigns/mining/

Forestry Commission Research. (2026). Galamsey destroys 9,000 hectares of forest reserves. *Daily Graphic*, p. 16.

Freire, P. (2018). *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (7th ed.). Bloomsbury.

Haynes, J. (2025). Galamsey, elites and economic survival. *Daily Graphic*, p. 17.

Imel, S. (1997). Adult learning in groups. *Review of Educational Research, 52*(3), 421–445.

Note, D., De Backer, F., & de Donder, L. (2021). A novel viewpoint on andragogy: Enabling moments of community. *Adult Education Quarterly, 71*(1), 3–19.

https://doi.org/10.1177/07417136209221361

Right Question Institute. (2026). *Empowerment spotlight: Adult educators as catalysts for self-advocacy*. https://rightquestion.org/resources/legal-empowerment-spotlight-adult-educators-as-catalysts-for-self-advocacy/

Sousa, J. W. (2021). Community development in Canadian adult education: Looking back and forward. *The Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education, 33*(2), 27–43.

Sperton. (2023). *Norway's energy frontiers: Oil and gas insights*. https://www.sperton.com/all/norways-energy-frontier-oil-gas-insights-2023/

Vella, J. (2018). *Learning to listen, learning to teach: The power of dialogue in educating adults*. Jossey-Bass.

Isaac Kofi Biney is a Professor of Adult Education and Community Development and the Head of UGLCs. He writes in the areas of adult education, community development, entrepreneurship and lifelong learning, and has over 70 articles published. Isaac has published three books, and three more are in press. He lectures in the Department of Adult Education and Human Resource Studies, University of Ghana. Isaac engages in capacity building of employees of organizations in alternative livelihood programs (ALP). He writes on young adults' growth and enterprising mindsets, and how they create enterprises and make rural communities more thriving, vibrant and sustainable.

Fifty Years Later: The Origins of AHEA

Alan Mandell and Xenia Coulter

Abstract.

Four early members of AHEA, Carla Payne, Kathleen Taylor, Patricia Brewer, and Catherine Marienau, describe the importance of the organization created 50 years ago to support the participation of adult learners in higher education. They also reflect on how the then-called Alliance contributed to their own growth as adult educators. Even today, they feel a passion – joy – for the experiences and experimentation, some even promoted by the organization, that were shared at the yearly AHEA conferences. Is it too much to hope that the knowledge gained with AHEA support may someday be understood as relevant to all college learners?

Keywords*: Adult learners, university access, community of practice, innovation*

The goal of this session, facilitated by Alan Mandell and Xenia Coulter was to recognize the 50th anniversary of AHEA (which many of us quite appropriately and fondly refer to as "The Alliance"). The facilitators thought that a unique way to celebrate this important institutional occasion was to invite four early members of our community (one of whom goes back to AHEA's beginning!) to reflect on their Alliance experiences. Why were they drawn to this organization? What did they value most? How might their experiences have relevance as we think about the realities and possibilities of adult higher education today? What can we all learn from this rich 50-year history as we move forward?

Patricia Brewer, Catherine Marienau, Carla Payne, and Kathleen Taylor eagerly accepted our invitation to reflect upon their individual experiences as past members, planners, contributors, and AHEA officers. In the spirit of this year's conference theme of "Joy," their experiences often accented the passion they felt as part of a movement of which the AHEA was such a vital part. Even today, they feel the same dedication to enhancing adult students' growth and oftentimes transformation in the world of higher education, as is evident in the following reflections.

Individual Reflections

Carla R. Payne

As a professional organization, the Alliance/AHEA was distinctive. We met in different places, hosted by different kinds of institutions. In a Goldilocks sense, the organization and its meetings were neither too big nor too small, but just right; big enough so that there were always new people to meet, with different ideas and experiences to share, and small enough so that I could count on seeing most of the same people year after year, renewing friendships and building collegial ties. We discussed cross-institutional projects; collaborations were launched and evaluated.

In this environment, I began to think about how I was doing what I was doing, not a priority when I started teaching. After all, on my very first day in 1962, when I asked the department chair what I was supposed to do, he thrust a textbook into my hand and said "Just go out there and teach"—or something like that. And I began to see the relationship between theoretical questions like "What does it mean to know?" and the basic issues of teaching: "How do we learn?" and "How do we teach?" These experiences also helped me to make some sense of my faculty role at Goddard College, where "alternative education" was exciting and chaotic. And they helped me to see how and why teaching had to move away from merely transmitting information to passive recipients, toward cultivating active, critical, inquiring minds. Of course, this is a transition which we haven't nearly completed. We don't really know whether the digital revolution helps us or not, whether it takes us forward or pulls us back. Once again, AHEA can be where we learn from each other, and where we are reminded that we must not thoughtlessly accept old models of learning and living, which are now being resurrected and deployed.

There is another lesson in this organization's history. I have heard my colleagues speak of AHEA in its earlier days as a "community of practice." It's the "community" part which is especially needed as an example these days. "Learner-centered" education was a corrective to the older teacher-centered model, but it was also one aspect of the trend toward individualism that occurs throughout American history and culture. In its extreme form this trend emphasizes competition and "self-care" over cooperation for common purposes and care of each other, and it lends itself to exploiting isolated individuals. In the AHEA framework, people, programs, and institutions collaborated toward shared goals in serving adult learners. This gives me hope that if we keep working together, we can avoid Humpty-Dumpty's fate. If we don't break it, we won't have to fix it.

Kathleen Taylor

As a former adult re-entry student, whose UWW-based baccalaureate experience led to personal and career transformation, I was a belated entry to the field of adult higher education. My initial introduction to the Alliance was to a world both familiar and startling, maybe startling *because* it was familiar. Though I had first-hand experience of being a non-traditional student (the kind Alliance focused on serving), it was startling to find myself in a country I hadn't known existed, but where everyone spoke my language and welcomed me as a member of the tribe.

Reflecting now on the experience leads me to think again about the enormous contributions the Alliance made to me as both an individual and a professional. Early on, many adult-serving programs were housed in traditional institutions that looked at our innovative programs with something less than approval. Alliance provided a community of practice where I no longer felt my credentials as a "non-traditional" educator were somehow second-rate. Instead, wonderful corridor conversations enabled us to compare notes, find allies, and provide input and concrete support across geographic and institutional boundaries.

At the same time, the field itself was growing and changing in line with rapidly increasing research and publications. The Alliance was a source of exchange, expansion, and theoretical analysis that underscored the values and purposes of adult education beyond degree completion, second chances, and greater economic equity.

As the new kid on the block, I didn't recognize then (I suspect others did): The Alliance was praxis in action.

Patricia Brewer

The notion of vocation varies across cultures, but each conceptualization includes a connection among the person, their role in the community, and the higher power that they see in the universe. Native Americans see vocation intertwined with the land, nature and its resources; vocation is focused on benefit to the community. Catholics consider four categories of vocations (married life, single life, vowed life, and ordained) and identify a calling or summons identified with each. For faithful Lutherans, every vocation is holy because the people fulfilling the vocation are holy. In Buddhism, vocation is understood as a means to cultivate mindfulness, wisdom, and compassion. At the time I was making my way into adult higher education employment, Parker Palmer's writings encouraged the old Quaker wisdom, "Let your life speak." In the late 1980s and newly hired to work in a community college department devoted exclusively to the education of adult students, I was attempting to do that but often found myself isolated in the traditional institution that surrounded me.

When I discovered the Alliance (now the Adult Higher Education Alliance), I found an organization with profound influence: *it enabled my vocation*. As a result of that chance meeting, I became a member of a professional organization that was, in reality, a learning community of common purpose and shared values. What were those values? According to one of our members who was present at the launch, the Alliance was grounded in four basic attributes – all in support of democracy:

- Access for adult learners
- Innovation and experimental curricular design
- Quality assurance through administrative practices and assessment of student

learning

- Collaboration among institutions.

I sometimes say that I've had one, single-focused job at very different institutions my entire life. These venues include a large community college; a small private, religiously affiliated school in Appalachia; two multi-campus universities with both rural and inner-city learners; a regional state institution in Indiana; and finally, a fully online, for-profit university with thousands of

adult students. Each of these institutions, in its own way, has fulfilled the Alliance values. Collectively, their focus has been on access for adult learners, a value that unapologetically emphasizes the diversity, equity, and inclusion of adults. These are the institutions that designed innovative competency-based education, accelerated degree programs, and emphasized mentoring of adult students. Through respect for what the learner brings to education, Alliance institutions embraced prior learning assessment - the stepping stone for the current outcomes assessment movement. And through its collaborative nature and agreed-upon administrative best practices, the Alliance established quality control standards that allowed innovative curricula and experimentation to thrive, thereby serving adult learners in higher education well and with integrity.

It's not clear if the values forged during this remarkable time in adult higher education will be sustained, but I'm grateful that a learning community such as the Alliance was there during my personal timeline, willing and able to support my vocation in service to adult students.

Catherine Marienau

I joined The Alliance at its very beginning. When I reflect on what the Alliance/AHEA has meant to me, it isn't titles or publications that come first to mind. It is people—walking into a conference and thinking, *These are my people.*

It didn't matter what roles we carried—teacher, mentor, administrator, researcher, writer. We came together with a shared purpose: to craft innovative programs and practices for adult learners who had too often been shut out of mainstream higher education.

We were practical people, working in real programs with real students, navigating institutions that were not always welcoming—and sometimes openly resistant. Coming together at Alliance/AHEA assemblies felt like coming up for air. It was a space where our work made sense, and where we ourselves made sense.

The year I served as President—around 1990—we experimented with "corridor conversations." Intentional open time outside formal sessions gave people the freedom to speak candidly about the challenges they faced, the compromises they made, and the creative solutions they were trying out. Those conversations sparked a buzz that lasted throughout the conference. I returned home not only with new ideas, but with renewed courage.

Another enduring lesson is the deep, sustaining interplay of practice and theory. In the 1970s, many of us were practitioners, often invisible within the field of adult education, solving problems and building programs without the language—or recognition—that theory provided. The Alliance/AHEA gave us a platform to expand our knowledge, to reflect on our work, and to help shape the field itself. One lasting example is the 1990 publication we produced with the American Council on Education, *Principles of Good Practice for Alternative and External*

Degree Programs for Adults. Those principles continue to guide practice today, affirming the wisdom of merging insight with action.

I never set out to earn a Ph.D. or a tenured professorship. What propelled me was a commitment to learners on the margins and a persistent curiosity about how to serve them better. Alliance/AHEA colleagues encouraged me to embrace my identity as an adult educator and to cultivate knowledge that would make me more effective. I came to see myself—and continue to see myself—as a practitioner-scholar, finding joy in ideas that matter and in translating them into practice.

AHEA was never simply about ideas, and never simply about programs. It was about holding them together—practice informed by theory, theory tested in practice—always in service of adult learners who deserved far more from higher education than they were often offered. And it was about connection, courage, and affirmation that, in this community, our work truly mattered.

Decades with Alliance/AHEA have shown me that adult education must never stand still. Learners continue to face economic, social, and institutional barriers, and our work calls for leaders who meet these challenges with courage, imagination, and resolve. The creativity, commitment, and boldness that shaped Alliance/AHEA's early years can—and must—propel adult education into the next fifty years with courage and vision.

Final Thoughts

As long-time members of AHEA ourselves, we too are proud to have been affiliated with this organization and its continued commitment to adult students in college as our partners in learning. As Tom Rocco stated in his speech to the Alliance in 2010, "We teach students, not courses." We hope the experiences of the four prior members similarly inspire other current AHEA members. The struggle is not over, but as higher education as a whole now seeks new approaches to college teaching more appropriate for societal and individual needs in our constantly changing world, our effort in educating adult learners may become recognized as relevant and a possible step forward for all learners.

Alan Mandell is Professor Emeritus at SUNY Empire State University (ESU) and SUNY Distinguished Service Professor. For decades, he served as mentor, administrator, and faculty in the Social Sciences. With Lee Herman he has written about mentoring; with Elana Michelson, about experiential learning, and with Xenia Coulter, about adult learning. Recognition includes the Sullivan Award for Leadership, the SUNY Chancellor's award for Excellence in Teaching, and for Professional Services, the ESU Award in Mentoring, the Turben Chair in Adult Learning and the Morris T. Keeton Award (CAEL).

Xenia Coulter is Professor Emeritus at SUNY Empire State University with a Ph.D. in Psychology from Princeton University. A recipient of various teaching awards, she has also published and presented, often with her colleague, Alan Mandell, on issues of adult learning, teaching, and mentoring, higher education, prior learning assessment, and the philosophy of education. Her more recent publications, include their edited volume, *Adult Educators on Dewey's Experience and Education* (2018), and a chapter in Avila, Rud, Waks, & Ring, *The Contemporary Relevance of John Dewey's Theories on Teaching and Learning* (2022)

Published by the **Adult Higher Education Alliance (AHEA)**. © 2026 Adult Higher Education Alliance. All rights reserved. Copyright in individual chapters remains with the respective authors.