

BOOMERS GO TO COLLEGE

A Report on the Survey of Students 40 and Older

Conducted by the

Portland Community College

Taskforce on Aging

Draft Report for Comment and Review

Released in Portland, Oregon at the Portland Community College

Age Boom Conference

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Acknowledgements

The Portland Community College Taskforce on Aging is pleased to present this first report based on the Survey of Students 40 and Older conducted in May 2006.

This first report is released on the occasion of the Age Boom Conference that culminates a year of Taskforce deliberations and investigation on how PCC can best prepare for Oregon's aging population, the aging workforce, and our own aging student body. The conference brings our faculty and staff together with our business and community partners to explore how the College can most effectively respond to the age boom we are all confronting. Understanding the needs and aspirations of our older students is a critical part of those explorations.

While the survey results will guide our internal process on adapting our College's programs and services, we wish to share our initial findings with the broader higher education community that is grappling with similar issues. We welcome your comments and reflections, and extend our assistance to other community colleges or universities that may want to conduct a similar survey. Please direct your comments to ger@pcc.edu.

The Older Learner Committee of the Taskforce on Aging gratefully acknowledges support and assistance from several partners in this effort. AARP Oregon provided initial funding to support the survey development process, and the AARP Office of Academic Affairs provided financial support for the daunting analysis of the extensive student responses to open-ended questions. Special thanks are due to Judith Anderson – the “spiritual mother” of this project – who founded Wisdom Keepers, conceived of the idea to conduct a survey and shepherded the initial research and survey instrument development.

Older Learner Committee members Roger Frank and Frieda Campbell-Peltier of PCC, Joyce DeMonnin of AARP Oregon, and Jennifer Sasser of Marylhurst University all contributed to the survey analysis and drafted key report sections. Linda Wiener and Danese Jundt of PCC both made valuable contributions to the effort. Bret Roske contributed long hours to organize all 111 pages of coded student comments – a critical piece of this collaborative effort. Jan Abushakrah and Barbara Dibs joined forces to produce the final draft.

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Co-Chair, PCC Taskforce on Aging
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Boomers Go to College

Executive Summary

Boomers Go to College provides the first detailed study of the wave of baby boomers enrolling in colleges across the country in record numbers. Unlike previous studies of older learners in lifelong learning programs, *Boomers* provides an unprecedented profile of these highly motivated students enrolled in for-credit programs and looking for career advancement.

The study reveals that at PCC some 4 out of 5 students are taking classes not simply for personal enrichment, but to upgrade their skills, re-enter the workforce, or re-career. Despite juggling work, home, family, and school obligations, these older students are intent on completing their studies in a relatively short timeframe to enable them to translate their education into meaningful employment.

The report discusses promising program and service directions that colleges across the country may consider to support the “new” older student. Recommendations include increased flexibility in class scheduling and content, credit for work-based learning and focused coursework designed for older students who already have significant life/education/workplace experience, expanded counseling and advising services to mentor and coach older students to successfully reach their goals, and development of internships and other workplace training programs in partnership with local employers in the community.

This report by the Portland Community College Taskforce on Aging was initiated by older students themselves through Wisdom Keepers – a student resource initiative of the Gerontology Program. The AARP-Oregon office supported the development and testing of the survey, while the AARP Office of Academic Affairs funded the analysis of the extensive qualitative comments of the respondents.

Introduction

In 2006, as the first of the country's 77 million baby boomers turned 60, attention within higher education began to focus on the potential implications of this age wave on its programs and services. In "Ferment and Change: Higher Education in 2015,"¹ Daniel Yankelovich cites the influx of students 55 to 75 years old within the next decade as one of the most significant developments and challenges confronting higher education today. As this age group redefines the nature of both retirement and work, notes Yankelovich, higher education will want to reconsider "virtually every aspect of higher education that is now geared to young people at the start of their work lives rather than those nearing the end... [and] to strengthen existing programs for the growing numbers of adults who wish to add new areas of competence...matching the needs of older adults with more-suitable materials and more-convenient timetables."

Lifelong learning has been a recurring theme, if not a preoccupation, of education policy and practice internationally. One of the challenges—and opportunities—for higher education in the coming decades is reconceptualizing lifelong learning in order to meet the needs of contemporary adult learners, in particular the expanding segment of the "older learner" population composed of baby boomers. In an interview published in a recent Council for Adult and Experiential Learning publication *CAEL Forum & News*, Harry R. Moody, Director of the AARP Office of Academic Affairs, suggests, "...colleges and universities need to give serious attention to lifelong learning, which includes both retraining older workers and liberal education for its own sake – these can both be highly lucrative markets for higher education."²

¹ Daniel Yankelovich, "Ferment and Change in Higher Education," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (November 25, 2005). See <http://publicagenda.org> for complete text.

²B. Klein-Collins, "An interview with Harry R. Moody." *CAEL Forum & News*: 26-27 (Chicago, Illinois: CAEL), as quoted by Jennifer Sasser, Marylhurst University and member of the PCC Taskforce on Aging Older Learner Committee.

Civic Ventures, MetLife, and other organizations studying aging boomers point to the key role community colleges can play in insuring that the generation entering a new life stage stays active and involved both in work and civic activities:

Because this new stage of life is likely to span several decades and will be characterized by general good health and an active, engaged lifestyle, adults entering this uncharted territory are finding little in the way of guidance and appealing opportunities for shaping these bonus years. And community colleges, which have throughout their history typified themselves as resourceful and adaptive to new educational opportunities, are better suited than perhaps any other American institution to respond to this new stage of life for Americans.³

Rising to the challenge, the American Association of Community Colleges and Association of Community College Trustees, partnering with AARP, Civic Ventures, and other national organizations, have made themselves available as resources to colleges interested in becoming more engaged with what Tony Zeiss describes as “An Encore Opportunity.”⁴ Noting that four of five people over 50 intend to work in retirement and anticipate a lifestyle blending work, education, and leisure, Zeiss calls on community colleges to seize the opportunity to provide innovative programs to serve this population with the responsiveness and accessibility that have become community college hallmarks.

³ Judy Goggin and Bernie Ronan, “Our Next Chapter: Community Colleges and the Aging Baby Boomers,” League of Innovations Leadership Abstracts 17 (11) (November 2004), reprinted on <http://www.civicventures.org>.

⁴ Tony Zeiss, “Baby Boomers: An Encore Opportunity,” *Community College Journal* (August/September 2006): 39-41.

The PCC Survey of Students 40 and Older

As PCC's Taskforce on Aging began an audit of its existing programs and services to consider how well they met the presumed needs of the boomer generation, student representatives on the Taskforce lobbied that a survey be designed and implemented in order to find out directly from the students themselves what they need and want to hear what older students needed and wanted from the students themselves. Wisdom Keepers – a student resource initiative of the PCC Gerontology Program – had already been actively supporting older learners with computer tutoring, information and referral services, and career- and work-related presentations since its inception in 2004. Through their efforts, we gathered anecdotal information on what older learners were seeking, but we wanted to delve deeper.

Wisdom Keepers, led by Judith Anderson, took the lead and approached AARP-Oregon for an incentive grant to develop the survey. With help from the Taskforce on Aging's Older Learner committee, Wisdom Keepers reviewed the literature on older learners, developed several drafts of the survey instrument, tested it with input from a number of older students enrolled in several PCC courses and programs across the district, and worked with PCC's Office of Institutional Effectiveness to produce the "Survey of Students 40 and Older," which was emailed to 10,451 students during spring term in 2006 (see Appendix A for details). The results of the survey confirmed what observers of aging boomers had been saying, but presented some surprises as well.

Students' reactions to the survey were surprisingly positive, with an overall response rate of 12.5%. An unintended consequence of the emailed survey, however, was that 90 percent of the respondents were enrolled in credit courses, with only a fraction (less than 1 percent) of the

non-credit students enrolled in Adult Basic Education, ESL, Community Education, Continuing Education, and Workforce Development represented in survey results.

This unintended consequence presented us with an unexpected treasure. Research on older learners to date has concentrated primarily on students in lifelong learning settings, including community and institute programs, continuing education, and other programs designed especially for older adults. While the role of community colleges in retraining and re-careering boomers for extended employment has been acknowledged, the experience of boomers studying in college transfer and professional technical programs for those purposes has not been studied – until now.

What the Older Learner Arrives With

Motivation and Goals

On the whole, older learners are motivated learners. They are adults “with a great deal of life experience already,” who know “what they want to achieve, and [are] willing to work to make that achievement happen.”⁵ They arrive at college with end goals in sight, although they may not know exactly how to reach them or even how to articulate them at first. Primarily, those goals are work or career related.

While 8 in 10 of the survey respondents considered “personal enrichment” one of their reasons for attending PCC, fewer than half enrolled to take general education courses exclusively, and fewer than a third to earn a college transfer degree. This sets them apart from their younger classmates, as does the fact that more than 4 in 10 arrive with a degree already in hand, whether an associates, bachelors, or higher. For most older learners, it would seem, their time at the community college is at the end of their formal higher education path, while for many of their younger classmates, the community college represents just the beginning.

Instead, older students have their eyes on the prize of an improved career. Over three-quarters of the respondents are taking classes to “upgrade or acquire new work-related skills” and nearly as many to “prepare for a new career.” More than half are working toward a professional technical degree, while 2 in 10 are looking to “maintain a license or professional credential.”

Life Experience and a Belief in Attainability of Goals

Older learners at PCC, consistent with the research on older learners, bring with them vast and varied educational, work, and life experience. As well as having prior degrees, the survey results indicate that many work at least part time, are raising families, or both. Moreover, by sheer virtue

⁵ Unless otherwise noted, quotes are excerpted from survey responses with minor editing for clarity.

of their age, all have acquired life experience and life skills that demand consideration and assessment to assist older learners as they strive to reach their educational and professional goals.

Along with their extensive backgrounds, older students bring with them a strong belief that their goals are attainable at the community college, and within relatively short order. Half of the respondents indicated they were “very or somewhat likely to reach their academic and career preparation goals” within a year; another quarter expected to achieve their goals within two years. Their responses would indicate that older learners are highly focused on doing their best and moving through the system as quickly as possible, despite the fact that most are attending only part time.

Obstacles to Achieving Goals

Although highly motivated, the many complexities of adult life can hinder older learners. In the words of one respondent, an older learner often inhabits three encompassing roles: “full-time employee, full-time student, full-time family member.” As a result of multiple and competing priorities, “time constraints,” chosen by nearly 8 in 10 respondents, topped the list of obstacles toward achieving goals.

Family and work obligations can be particularly burdensome when schoolwork is added to the mix. Older students may be impeded by illness, whether on the part of their children, grandchildren, parents, partners, or they themselves. They may be raising one or more children as a single parent, or caring for elderly parents, or both. In the experience of one student, “When you are an older student, you usually have a lot of family issues...During my years in school, I have had family deaths, births, family illnesses and custody battles, all of which I was involved [in] because I was a grandparent.” Childcare was frequently cited as a concern, as were job responsibilities that conflicted with class deadlines and workload.

Second only to time constraints as a barrier toward achieving goals were “financial concerns,” cited by 6 in 10 respondents. Many were disheartened by the limited financial aid available to older students. “There isn’t much funding available for people with prior degrees who are switching professions in mid-life, nor are there many available work-study programs for older, [more experienced] people,” noted one respondent, echoing an oft-cited viewpoint. Others expressed dismay about the high cost of tuition, fees, and textbooks.

Another notable impediment toward achieving goals centered on health concerns, cited by twenty-five percent of respondents. While at first glance this smaller percentage may appear to relegate health concerns to a place of lesser significance, it’s worth noting that only slightly more than one-third of survey respondents were 50 or older. Given that health issues generally increase with age, as the trend in older learners returning to school grows, health considerations can be expected to grow as well. Prime concerns included limited availability of services that support students with disabilities, and general physical decline in vision, hearing, and mobility. Some students, for example, expressed a need to sit closer to the front of the class, or requested that schedules and assignments be printed in larger type. Others found it difficult to walk the considerable distance from campus parking lots to their classrooms.

Preparing to be a Successful Student (What Students Expect and What They Find)

Entry into College

Although older students returning to school often arrive with goals in mind, they consistently request that the college offer support services to help them achieve them. One respondent expressed it this way: “[For] older learners who are coming to school for the first time or returning after years, the culture is very different than it was. It is a challenge for older students to balance all the responsibilities of [their] lives and to adjust and do well. They need encouragement.” Whether navigating their way through registration procedures or online courses, or mapping out a customized course of study that considers their college goals *and* their life experience, older students want help. Already short on time, they want to be confident that they aren’t going to waste any. In the words of one respondent, “I feel that life experience should be applicable to the degree program. I’ve had to take classes that didn’t really teach much new material than I had already known from experience. This was a waste of both my time and money.” Older students want to be able to more easily “challenge some classes for credit.”

Survey respondents expressed the need for a range of support systems upon or just prior to entering the college, including new student orientations, assessment of their prior life/work experience, and one-to-one mentoring. Older students called for “a mentor, an advocate for returning adults,” “someone to tell new people what classes to start with,” “someone to help guide me through the initial process of re-entering college after 20 years.” One student offered this insight:

Many older students are seeking career changes, others are seeking to complete careers started years ago, such as myself... I would suggest having a formal assessment prior to starting classes where past and future classes are assessed and a plan is outlined to follow.

This will help the student stay on track, not taking unnecessary classes. Outline a time frame. It is very helpful to know there is light at the end of the tunnel.

Awareness and Efficacy of Support Services

To begin with, students need to be made aware of what support services the college offers. While half of the respondents expressed interest in job readiness workshops for older students, better than 3 out of 4 didn't utilize the existing job placement/cooperative education services available at the college. Two-thirds expressed interest in tutoring services for older learners, but two-thirds also didn't use the existing tutoring services.

But the services need to be worthwhile for the students as well. Of those who did access tutoring services, only 1 in 4 were "satisfied" or "very satisfied." The job placement/cooperative education services at the college fared considerably worse, where only 1 in 10 of the small percentage of those who utilized them were "satisfied" or "very satisfied." Clearly, the dissatisfaction older students experience with these traditional student support systems requires further investigation.

Focus on Academic Advising for Older Students

Consistent with the widespread finding that older students attend college to improve their marketability in the workforce, two-thirds of the survey respondents said they would be likely to participate in career exploration workshops specifically designed for students over 40 if they were made available. Better than two-thirds sought out the college's academic advising services, but a full half of those who did were not satisfied with the assistance they received. For some, getting in to see an advisor in the first place was challenging. Students who work during the day were hampered by the limited hours that advisors are available. Some lamented that phone appointments were not offered. But the bulk of students' comments relating to their

dissatisfaction had remarkable similarities, including complaints about getting inconsistent—often conflicting—information or inaccurate advice, receiving little or no assistance with a sense of direction, and having a sense of being rushed through the system. “The advisors need to have more information on each specific field of study,” wrote one student, calling the advice “very vague and uninformative.” “I don’t think the counselor knew enough about the direction I was taking,” wrote another. Several labeled the advice “generic,” while they were looking for more specific advice related to their desired career direction. Inaccurate advice resulted in students either taking classes they didn’t need or *not* taking ones they did, thus delaying them in achieving their goals.

While some reported satisfying interactions with advisors, more related experiences in which they felt the advisors were uninterested in helping them. Here is where respondents’ comments specifically reflected their experiences as *older* students:

- “I understand retention is a priority, however, I do not have money to waste, as a female over 50, nor do I have the time. I would just like to know where I stand and what I really need to focus on.”
- “I want more detailed info. What are the hot future job outlooks? What should I focus on? I have over 20 years in work experience. I am just going to school now to stay competitive and earn a piece of paper in case I get laid off again.”
- “It is hard enough to go back to school later in life [to] then be treated disrespectfully by people that are there to help me. [It] made me feel like I was wasting my time.”
- “I feel sometimes that advisors treat us older people like we should know what we are doing and shouldn’t be asking questions.”

- “The academic advisor did not actively pursue a complete evaluation of prior work.”
- “Look at the degrees and background of the student.”
- “When I met with an academic advisor to outline a plan of courses, which needed to be very specific since I am under time constraints, I did not feel at all like I received help.”
- “Felt that the advisors were not too interested in my goals because of my age.”
- “I needed advising by a mature person closer to my age who understands the difficulties and prejudices faced by an older person in a ‘young’ environment.”

Coupled with an interest in enhanced academic advising, half of the surveyed students also indicated an interest in peer mentoring specifically for older students. Others, noting that “support services do not seem suited to the older student,” called for support networks for older adults “to discuss concerns or obtain pertinent information.” Study groups for older students and support groups for working adults were also requested.

Assessment and Testing

Assessment and testing is another area that older students felt needed improvement. More than half of the nearly two-thirds of respondents who used the testing and assessment service were not satisfied. Some students questioned the validity of the testing results after being placed into coursework that they (and their instructors) believed they were well beyond. A significant number, especially those with prior degrees, suggested that refresher math workshops, rather than full-term courses, were all they needed to place higher; as one student put it, “I’ve been out of school a while and don’t want to go back and take lower level courses again when what I need is a refresher so that I can test out to take upper level courses again.” Still others challenged the

relevance of certain required courses in math and writing, given their education/employment goals. In the words of one student, “When you are older, time is important. I feel better testing can be done to get older students going on their studies. Life experience should be included as well.”

Additional Preparatory Skills Supports

Older students welcome programs that prepare them for the rigors of college-level coursework by assisting them in building their skills. Two-thirds would likely participate in memory skills workshops tailored for older students, and the majority would take part in study skills workshops as well. “My brain doesn’t seem to have the same capacity for memorization as it did,” acknowledged one student. Numerous comments on time constraints (cited by 77.7% of respondents as an obstacle in achieving their goals) suggest that time management workshops would also be highly beneficial.

Computer-related training is another area of need. Older students don’t always know what skill level they need to succeed, and they rely on the college to set the bar. “When I first began, I had many difficulties keeping up because my computer skills were not up to speed. If I had been tested and then [taken] some basic courses, possibly as a requirement, I could [have used] the tools available to me on the computer and on the PCC website,” noted one. Another called the lack of basic computer skills “very detrimental,” and suggested that “most people in my age group never received basic computer skills or knowledge of how to navigate...the internet.” “Make sure we know we must be computer literate,” urged a third.

The Educational Experience: Classrooms and Coursework

Course Availability, Format, and Scheduling

The time constraints experienced by older students surface again as students search for classes offered at the times and in the formats they need. The majority of older students has taken both day and evening classes, and half have enrolled in weekend or online classes. Although they have taken weekday classes more often than any other type (45.6% M-F daytime v. 37.1% evenings v. 12.0% online), this is due to this scheduling format often being their only option. Only half of the students were satisfied that they were able to find classes they needed at the times they were able to take them, and fewer than two-thirds report that courses were offered in the format they wanted. Repeatedly, students asked for more evening, weekend, and online classes, particularly for required core courses. In some cases, “required prerequisite classes [are] offered only once a year.” Often, there are “not enough evening or online classes to satisfy [the] degree [requirements],” nor does the college “offer a complete degree program online.” Another difficulty expressed by respondents was that classes are not always offered at a convenient campus; some had to attend classes at more than one campus (13% take classes at multiple campuses), even on the same day.

Course Requirements

When students do find the classes they need, they may be dismayed by the time and energy demands of keeping up with the coursework itself. Whether extending an already long day to take an evening class or finding time to do homework, older students who work, many of whom have family responsibilities as well, are under particular pressure. They have “no time between class sessions to do the homework,” thus, “little time to study until the weekend.” They find that “many teachers assign things as if you have nothing going on besides school.” Representative of

others, one student wrote about time constraints, a fierce desire to succeed, and an alternative timeframe for the coursework:

Many fellow students and [I] have multiple obligations. I have had two professors who greatly underestimate the time required to succeed in their class. I spent 25 hours studying for the last test I took...I'd rather take 2 quarters than study like this for 10 weeks. So far I have straight A's.

The need for less work and/or more time was voiced frequently. In some cases, rather than responsibilities outside school, age was the reason students requested a more manageable pace. "In some math classes, I feel like I need more time to absorb the material than a semester," one respondent observed. Another felt that:

Teachers should allow us to correct any mistakes and turn [work] in [again] for full credit. Many of us in our early 50s agree that this would benefit us a great deal. Also, allow us to take our time with tests. As smart as I think I am, we older students need more time to process information and it takes longer to recall information when pushed in a time crunch.

A prevalent theme underlying a substantial number of comments, such as those above, was older students' commitment to meaningful learning. Whether trying to maintain a high grade point average or expressing a need for course content to be presented at a more digestible pace, time and again these students indicated that they are in college to learn, and to learn well. They want time enough to understand the course material, but don't want to spend unnecessary time with coursework that is irrelevant or redundant. If the tone of their remarks could be summed up, it might sound like this student:

We aren't ready for rocking chairs; we are changing careers. Often we are busier than younger people and we need more flexibility in class times. We may not need what is commonly referred to as 'breadth classes.' We have had life experiences and we often have other degrees. We need classes that focus on what we need to know, not upon philosophy or years of historical information.

Challenges of the Multigenerational Classroom

To differing degrees, older students have concerns about their interactions with younger students, and, to a larger extent, with their instructors. A substantial majority (75.73%) reported positive interactions between younger and older students. This may be linked to the opportunities that the classroom presents to work with other students in small groups, as reported by two-thirds of the survey respondents. But not all older students were enamored of their younger classmates. They felt that they had very little in common with younger students, and could not relate to them. Also, some pointed out that younger students often disrespected or simply ignored older students. Being in classes with younger students made some of the older respondents feel "somewhat alienated" from the class.

The same sense of disrespect and alienation permeated comments about instructor interaction with older students. Two in five respondents felt that instructors did not appreciate their needs as an older learner. Some teachers give the impression that they "would rather not have an older student their class." Older students expressed reluctance about approaching their instructors, especially when the instructor "refuses to give help" or is "not inviting." Others were concerned that "teachers [talk] down to students...", "teachers are not interested in their students succeeding," and "adults are not getting respect like they should." As one student

expressed it, “I find that some instructors assume a model of an 18-year-old freshman—I find it patronizing and annoying.”

Jobs

As previously stated, the academic goals for a substantial majority of the respondents centered on work or career. Yet, surprisingly, roughly half of the respondents marked “not applicable” when asked whether they found support at the college in preparing for or finding employment. This high percentage is difficult to interpret. Either these students are not yet ready to prepare for or look for employment, or they are not looking for employment, or they simply don’t expect that the college will help them. Another striking percentage, given older students’ goals, is that fewer than a quarter of those surveyed were satisfied with the employment support they did find at the college.

The comments confirmed that many students did not know that the college had job placement or career readiness services, or found them unhelpful. Students were “not sure where to find support in preparing for or finding employment.” They didn’t know “anything like support for employment was available,” perhaps because they had “not received any sort of information from the school pertaining to helping adults with job placement of any kind.” Others believed the college was unwilling or unable to help students: “There are too few jobs for too many students. [The job placement office] took little interest in helping me secure employment.” Students asked for “more resources for jobs and programs that might be useful [for] transitioning employment,” and wanted to learn about “the practicalities of looking for and finding a job in [their] field.”

Age discrimination was raised as a concern, in both the college and work environments. Citing that “older students are not looked at seriously on this campus in the employment area,” students felt that the “job office is not oriented to older job seekers.” Several were concerned

about the difficulties they expect to find in the job market, and called for “more options of what kind of careers [older students] can get when [they] get out of school.” As one respondent put it:

Finding employment will be the biggest problem after I graduate...because of my age.

Employers tend to hire and retain younger workers. There is a lot of discrimination against women my age in the workforce. [It] would be helpful to have more programs...that would help me find lucrative employment.

Said another, “It is getting hard for older people to get a job out there. I guess experience doesn’t count anymore.”

Another respondent, who was “not someone who needed their hand held every step of the way,” offered this perspective on the college’s role in finding employment:

I think the college would do well to regularly schedule degree-seeking students for periodic academic advising/employment preparation review sessions. There seems to be a general lack of follow-up on the part of the college in regard to career guidance and employment placement. Part of my perception is assuredly my own fault; I simply haven’t sought out such guidance. But, that’s exactly my point: the college should be proactive in approaching its students about these issues.

Environment

The majority of students felt welcomed on campus, experienced positive classroom interactions between younger and older students, were able to read and understand the assigned reading in their classes, and had access to computers when needed. Most, too, were satisfied with college services and facilities such as registration, the library, and the bookstore. Many took the opportunity to praise specific departments, staff, and faculty with whom they had had exceptional interactions.

Yet some areas that were less than satisfying to older students kept cropping up in their comments. Several expressed a need for desks that fit an older person's body, rather than "the junior high school desks" that felt like "mini torture devices." Numerous requests were made for healthier food choices, better signage and "You Are Here" maps on campus, and parking closer to classroom buildings. Students believed that bookstore and cafeteria prices were too high, weekend hours for campus services were too short, and student support groups for older students too few.

Finally, students repeatedly conveyed dissatisfaction with the lack of customer service they frequently encountered when dealing with faculty, staff, and services throughout the college. Instead of information, staff conveyed impatience, and, rather than respect, students were met with rudeness. The pervasiveness of such comments reflects both older learners' higher expectations as consumers of education, and the need for the college to examine its approach to students as customers.

Recommendations

The recommendations for community college practice and policy emerging from this study suggest the need to move beyond stereotypes about “the older learner.” Labels like the “older student” and the “non-traditional student” are in fact often used interchangeably to refer to a staggeringly large age range from 25 to 65 and older. Perhaps it is time to consider the notion of the non-traditional student as outmoded as, according to the National Center for Education Statistics, 3 of every 4 undergraduate students in the U.S. fit the “non-traditional” category in some respect.

Adult learners in higher education share characteristics and patterns of educational participation that distinguish them from their “traditional”–18- to 24-year-old–classmates. They are considered financially independent for the purposes of eligibility for financial aid; they tend to attend college part time; they have often delayed enrollment in higher education after high school graduation or they have participated in higher education sporadically; they probably work full-time (35+ hours per week); they have responsibility for dependents other than a spouse; they might be a single parent; and sometimes they lack a high school diploma.⁶

In this light, it would seem useful to consider the emerging boomer student population that was the subject of this study as a cohort of adult learners characterized by demographic diversity while also sharing expectations and motivations that are perhaps informed by the common historical period in which they have traversed the life course. We don’t know yet what distinguishes this particular cohort from all adult learners, nor do we know what distinguishes older learners going to college to retrain and re-career from their counterparts engaged in life enrichment and lifelong learning programs.

⁶ National Council for Education Statistics, “Nontraditional undergraduates,” Report no. NCES 2002-012, Washington DC: NCES, 2002.

In any case, the following recommendations, based on students' extensive observations and reflections in the survey, closely parallel and build upon the guidelines and policies promoted by the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL), the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) and its affiliate National Council for Workforce Education (NCWE), Jobs for the Future (JFF), and the Center for Community College Policy.

1. **Outreach and market to older students based on the product offered, not the demographic.** The surveyed students objected to being considered “old,” or stereotyped because of their age. They were not looking for separate “senior” programs, but rather expected that the regular college services and programs should accord them the respect they deserve and meet their needs as they would any other student. The repeated demand for employment preparation and job placement services reflects the profile that four of five respondents were in school not only for personal enrichment, but for retraining and re-careering. Community colleges should play a central role in supporting those goals, and let the community know they are prepared to serve them.
2. **Ease the entry into college and honor experience.** Older students indicate they need an accessible and responsive point of entry to a system that can feel overwhelming and confusing to those who may have left the educational system decades earlier. Wrap-around advising and counseling services facilitated by a mentor or coach would help students navigate through the bureaucracy to obtain the courses and services they need to fulfill their goals. Such a program would ideally include peer mentors and coaches, who might be retirees or older students nearing the end of their studies. Community colleges have developed several model programs to address the education and training needs of adult learners, although such programs tend to be concentrated in the workforce development

divisions or designated only for particular groups. One-Stop Career Centers and programs like the Federal TRIO Program⁷ and Breaking Through,⁸ which provide integrated institutional structures and services, accelerated learning, career pathways, career guidance, job search and placement support, and skill development for high wage jobs, are the kinds of programs many older students indicate they need. Most important to these students would be the opportunity for assessment of their work and life experience through “Prior Learning Assessment” programs,⁹ or for recognition of a “Readiness for Work/Readiness for College” Certificate.¹⁰ The study revealed that programs and services that have proven so effective for dislocated and low-skill workers, low-income single-parent workers, first-generation college students and other groups could well serve the general population of older students who enter college with many of the same needs and goals.

- 3. Prepare students for success.** Completing a Prior Learning Assessment process could also serve to identify gaps in areas like study skills, time management, technical or college-level reading and writing, math, and computer skills. Older students indicate they would like to fill those gaps through intensive workshops, “refresher” courses, tutoring, and other alternatives that fit adult lives, learning styles, and preference for learning that is practical, contextualized, relevant, and hands on. Many students also require supportive services to handle life-family-school crises in order to focus their energies on coursework.

⁷ Federal TRIO Programs are educational opportunity outreach programs designed to motivate and support students from disadvantaged backgrounds. See <http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ope/trio/index.html>.

⁸ Jobs for the Future and the National Council for Workforce Education, *Breaking Through: Helping Low-Skilled Adults Enter and Succeed in College and Careers* (November 2004) <http://www.breakingthroughcc.org/>.

⁹ Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL), *Prior Learning Assessment*. <http://www.cael.org>

¹⁰ See Jobs for the Future (<http://www.jff.org>) and WorkKeys (<http://www.act.org>) for information on Work Readiness Certificates and Readiness for Work/Readiness for College correlations.

Typical issues the surveyed students indicated were potential obstacles to their success included finances, child and elder care, dental and healthcare access, and mental and behavioral health issues. Finally, students need access to high-speed internet and access to an adequate computer to support their coursework, whether in-class, hybrid or online.

4. **Provide a flexible, responsive educational environment that respects the complexities of adult life.** Juggling work, home, family, and school obligations, older students are extremely motivated to complete their studies in a relatively short timeframe and through alternative modalities, such as distance learning, to enable them to translate their education quickly into meaningful employment. Colleges can do much to support the older student, by increasing flexibility in class scheduling and content, providing credit for prior work-based learning, and adapting counseling and advising services to assist older students to successfully reach their goals. Facilities that accommodate aging bodies, food choices that encourage a healthy diet, and a spirit of welcoming customer service, would help older students feel more comfortable and at home in the college environment. Most importantly, older students must also have access to sufficient financial aid and retraining dollars.
5. **Consider age a diversity issue and embrace the multigenerational college.** College faculty and staff must be prepared to relate to a student profile that is becoming more complex and varied, representing not simply a range of chronological ages, but life-course stages, varied material and economic conditions, adult-life complexities, and distinct and shared cohort experiences.

Age must become an integral aspect of the community college commitment to honor diversity and promote values and practices that discourage intolerance and discrimination.

Like students from any background, older students need to feel welcome, valued for their knowledge and experience, and respected for what they bring to the college environment.

The challenge is to promote and incorporate age consciousness and intergenerational cooperation throughout every aspect of college activity, including student life, the curriculum, teaching, programs, staffing, personnel training practices, community services, and events.

Training in instructional strategies to promote intergenerational cooperation and to create meaningful learning experiences for all students, young and old, could be integrated into new faculty institutes and in-service workshops. Community colleges can also share and assess best practices among themselves to promote positive learning and interaction in age-diverse classrooms.

- 6. Help students manage their careers by providing adequate job preparation, internships and job placement services.** Throughout the survey, students repeatedly referred to the need for more effective job preparation workshops, coaching, peer mentoring, and workplace shadow mentoring. Extending the career pathways concept beyond workforce development programs to professional technical programs would enable older students to achieve milestones, more easily move between college and work, and receive workplace training to advance their career goals.

Internships are critical, particularly for students changing careers or re-entering the workforce after a prolonged absence. Such opportunities need to be intentional, and preferably supported by some kind financial aid or stipend through a business-college-government partnership similar to the federal work-study program. Professional technical

program advisory committees could be engaged as more effective partners in creating such opportunities that would provide clear pathways into “real jobs.”

Colleges should also expand their career re-entry programs, particularly in the critical fields of health, education, and social services.

7. **Follow-up with students at least one year following graduation.** Following the model of government employment training programs, which for years have been mandated to track the success of workers they have placed, colleges need to track their graduates, both for college transfer students and for graduates of professional technical programs as they enter their career path. Not only would this provide colleges a more realistic picture of their effectiveness, but the follow-up would provide the opportunity to help students whose job search or career path has stalled or gotten off track. Such follow-up systems, which could be done through program or discipline e-groups, would also enable colleges to create alumni networks to keep graduates connected with the college and available as mentors for new students and as ambassadors for the college and its programs.
8. **Facilitate lifelong learning that meets both personal and career goals.** Colleges need to remember that lifelong learning is also “livelihood learning.” Many careers and professions require on-going CEU credits to maintain certification or licenses, but success in any field requires continuing education and lifelong learning. Community colleges can do a better job of developing, highlighting and marketing continuing education and professional development courses that can keep older workers current in their field and fill in skill gaps as they arise on the job. Doing so requires coordination among college transfer, professional technical, continuing education, and workforce development divisions of the college.

9. **Build strong business-college-community partnerships.** Colleges need to strengthen and maintain on-going and effective partnerships with business and community partners – to know what employers need and want, to inform course and program development, to create meaningful and effective internships for students, and to facilitate students moving into successful career pathways. Business as usual will just not work. Older students are the “canaries in the mineshaft” that are returning to college for needed skill upgrades, preparation for jobs, and re-careering. They are telling us what works and what doesn’t work for them – they know what they are facing “out there,” and they realize that their previous education did not prepare them well. We need to listen. Accommodating older students does not require creating new and special programs, but it does require revamping what we do to support students throughout their educational experience and as they enter the workforce.

10. **Advice to Community Colleges – Ask Your Students!** The response to the Survey for Students 40 and Older was enormously successful. Some 36% of credit students responded to the survey and they had a lot to say. In over 100 pages of responses to open-ended questions, students shared their observations, complaints, and reflections on significant obstacles to achieving their goals, their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with a range of college services, how well PCC met or did not meet their expectations, and their specific suggestions about services for older students.

PCC learned a lot about these students, and their responses suggest a process for our college to effect institutional change to better serve these students and help them to meet their academic and career goals. We are now taking steps to begin that process in earnest.

We urge other community colleges around the country to conduct similar surveys. We are happy to share our experience and suggestions on how such a survey could be improved. Without hearing from students, you may continue to operate on outdated assumptions about “the older learner” or the “non-traditional student” that do not fit the current reality.

Finding out what older students think, what they need, what they feel, and what they aspire to could well start a fundamental process of transforming your institution.

Seize the opportunity!

Appendix A: The Survey

Wisdom Keepers, the student resource initiative of the Gerontology Program, initiated the idea of conducting a survey to learn about older students attending PCC, including their reasons for being in college, their needs and goals, and the quality of their educational experience.

Together with the Older Learner subcommittee of the Taskforce on Aging, Wisdom Keepers conducted a review of the literature on older learners, drafted the survey instrument, and tested it on several older students. The PCC Office of Institutional Effectiveness refined the instrument and pre-tested it before the link to the survey was emailed to all 10,451 students, registered in both credit and non-credit courses during the spring 2006 term.

All registered PCC students receive a PCC email address through MyPCC, an online community for students, faculty and staff of Portland Community College. The secure site allows students to check email, register for courses, communicate with other students and faculty, and take care of all aspects of college business.

Credit students are much more likely to log in to MyPCC regularly, as increasing numbers of faculty use the system to post course materials, conduct online discussions, and communicate with students throughout the term. In contrast, non-credit students may only log in to MyPCC to register for courses that meet only once or for a brief segment of a typical term, and most likely do not use MyPCC course tools.

Attempts were made to reach non-credit students in other ways. When the survey was emailed the first time during the seventh week of the term, Wisdom Keepers posted flyers on every campus and center of the college and forwarded bookmarks to advisors and several faculty members teaching non-credit courses. Three reminder emails were sent through the end of the

spring term. Despite these added efforts, non-credit students are markedly under-represented in the final survey results, with a return rate of less than 1%. For all practical purposes, the survey represents credit students, including a small percentage of students registered for both credit and non-credit courses. *Nine of 10 survey respondents were credit students, with an impressive 36 percent response rate.*

The link to the survey was sent in an email message, urging students to take a few minutes to complete the survey, and explaining that its purpose was “to learn how PCC can help students 40 and older achieve their academic and career goals,” and assuring that their “input will help us develop programs and services that better serve older students.”

Several respondents thanked the surveyors for being interested in hearing from older students. While a few students expressed skepticism that their recommendations would be taken seriously, close to 500 respondents provided their contact information for follow-up and offered their help in implementing the recommendations.

There was some debate about what to call the survey and what age groups to include. In the end, we decided to include all students 40 and older. The Office of Institutional Effectiveness uses the categories 40-49 and 50+. We assumed that students 40 and older would share characteristics, such as being out of the education system for a long period and being engaged in or looking for employment projected to last well into their 50s, 60s and beyond. We settled on the title, “Survey of Students Aged 40 and Older,” as being the most descriptive and least offensive of the alternatives. Despite these considerations, we received a few comments from students offended to be identified as “older.”

One in six students enrolled in credit courses is 40 and older, while 30 percent of the total unduplicated “headcount,” including credit and non-credit students, is 40 and older. The following table provides a detailed picture of total registered students by category of enrollment.

Table 1: PCC Credit and Non-Credit Students Spring Term 2006

PCC Spring 2006 Term Students 40+ Total Number Enrolled: 11,321* Survey Emails Sent to: 10,451	Responses to the Survey Total Survey Responses: 1,309 Total Return Rate: 12.5%
Credit Students - Total Headcount = 3,466 - 40-49 years 2,190 - 50+ 1,276 % of Total Enrollees 16.1% Av. Age of Enrollees 29 years	Credit Students Responding 1,244 Credit Student Response Rate 36% % of Total Respondents 90.5% - Credit Only Respondents 85.4% - Credit + Non-Credit 5.1%
ABE/GED - Total Headcount = 189 - 40-49 years 125 - 50+ 64 % of Total Enrollees 15.7% Av. Age of Enrollees 27 years	Non-Credit Only Respondents 65 % of Total Respondents 9.5% Non-Credit Response Rate 0.93%
ESL - Total Headcount = 607 - 40-49 years 373 - 50+ 234 % of Total Enrollees 28.9% Av. Age of Enrollees 35 years	
Community Education (CED) - Total Headcount = 4,442 - 40-49 years 1,589 - 50+ 2,833 % of Total Enrollees 53.1% Av. Age of Enrollees 42 years	
Continuing Education (CEU) - Total Headcount = 1,947 - 40-49 years 892 - 50+ 1,055 % of Total Enrollees 6.1% Av. Age of Enrollees 42 years	
Workforce Development - Total Headcount = 690 - 40-49 years 374 - 50+ 316 % of Total Enrollees 43.9% Av. Age of Enrollees 38 years	
*870 students were not included in the survey population, because they did not have PCC-issued email addresses. The assumption is that these were all non-credit students. The return rate is based on the number actually emailed the survey.	

Table 2: Selected Characteristics of Survey Respondents

SELECTED CHARACTERISTICS OF SURVEY RESPONDENTS						
(%)						
Gender	Female	70.1				
	Male	29.9				
Age	40-44		34.8			
	45-49		28.0			
	50-54		19.2			
	55-59		12.2			
	60+		5.8			
Education	High School			8.7		
	Some College			42.9		
	Associate Degree			15.3		
	Bachelors or Higher			30.6		
	Other			2.5		
Classification	Credit				85.4	
	Non-credit				9.5	
	Both				5.1	
Status¹	Full-time ²					27.6
	Part-time ²					72.4

1 Applies to credit students only

2 Full-time is defined as 12 or more credits; part-time, fewer than 12 credits.