

Adult Participation in Undergraduate Education:  
Trends, Patterns, and Attainment over the Life Course

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Undergraduate education is no longer just for kids – or, more appropriately, it is no longer just for 18-23 year olds. The percentage of enrollees in higher education who at least 25 years old has risen from 28% in 1970 to 42% in 2010, and that figure is expected to continue to climb through this decade (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). And *contra* the stereotype that adults either enroll in vocational certification programs or simply take courses for personal enrichment (the ‘lifelong learners’ image), many adult undergraduates earn bachelor’s degrees. Indeed, among recent baccalaureate earners, 34.5% were aged 24 or older, and 14.7% were at least 30 years of age (NCES 2010). However, despite the growing importance of adult educational participation to the higher educational sector and indeed to the broader society, research on this population has been minimal, and has largely been restricted to specialist journals (Donaldson & Townsend 2007; Sissel, Hansman & Kasworm 2001).

In this study, I first present a descriptive portrait of mature undergraduates: who they are and where they are enrolled (Table 1). I find that overwhelming majority of adult undergraduates – 79.4% - are seeking a bachelor’s degree<sup>1</sup>. Over two-thirds of adult BA-seekers initially began their postsecondary education at ‘traditional’ ages (see Elman & O’Rand 2007 for a similar finding), and they are disproportionately enrolled at community colleges and in the proprietary sector. Relative to

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<sup>1</sup> Students are defined as seeking a bachelor’s degree if they a) aspire to earn a bachelor’s degree and b) are enrolled in either a bachelor’s or associates degree program. Associates’ degree enrollees are included because students who plan to earn an associate’s degree en route to a bachelor’s are identified in the NPSAS as in associates’ programs.

traditionally-aged students, adult BA-seekers are more likely to be female, to be African-American, and to be first-generation college-goers. Nearly half of adult students are in households with incomes below 200% of the poverty line, whereas this is true of just under a third of traditionally-aged students. Adult students are far more likely than their younger peers to have dependent children, to be married, and to work full-time. Nearly a quarter of adult undergraduates had children prior to their initial postsecondary enrollment. A tiny fraction of adult students – less than 2% - live on-campus, compared with a quarter of traditionally-aged students. And compared with younger peers, adult students are far more likely to be earning degrees in fields with vocational application – in particular business and health fields (Table 2 and Fig. 1).

I proceed to examine trends in age-specific enrollment rates using the Current Population Survey's Educational Supplement, the Decennial Census, and the American Community Survey. I chart age-specific enrollment rates by race and gender from 1970-2010, extending earlier research by Jacobs & Stoner-Eby (1998). Crucially, I calculate rates of undergraduate participation for the appropriate population at risk – those in an age group who do not yet have a bachelor's degree, rather than for the entire age group.

Finally, I draw upon the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY 1979) in order to evaluate the contribution of adult undergraduate participation to the overall educational attainment for a cohort. I evaluate the incidence of educational upgrading which takes place over the adult life course, and chart the progression of cumulative attainment by race, gender, and socioeconomic background, and high school academic performance. I examine whether delayed attainment works to reduce or to exacerbate earlier disparities in educational attainment by race, class and gender.

## Sources

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## Tables

Table 1: Descriptive statistics contrasting traditionally-aged and adult baccalaureate-seekers

	Traditionally-Aged Students (18-23)	Adult Students (25+)
Began PSE prior to 24	100%	66.59%
Delayed Initial Enrollment (More than 1 Year)	5.40%	42.69%
Female	53.99%	60.63%
Black	10.95%	19.48%
Latino	13.40%	13.72%
Asian	6.38%	5.12%
White	65.11%	57.08%
Parental Education: unknown or less than HS	5.99%	14.25%
Parental Education: HS	25.28%	38.38%
Parental Education: Some College	21.34%	19.98%
Parental Ed: BA or more	47.41%	27.39%
Both Parents BA+	22.82%	8.71%
Mean HH Income	\$71,594.78	\$38,115.76
Income < 200% of poverty	32.92%	48.97%
Household home ownership	75.52%	42.79%
Non-home Assets > \$10K	26.05%	11.17%
Worked 30+ hours per week	27.22%	49.96%
Have dependent children	5.18%	51.6%
Married	4.32%	40.93%
Single Parent	4.82%	25.31%
Child prior to first PSE enrollment	2.43%	22.67%
Live on-Campus	24.77%	1.55%
Live with parents	30.47%	7.63%
HS GPA: C or lower*	12.67%	21.64%
HS GPA: A or higher*	37.9%	23.43%
HS Math: Took Calculus*	33.0%	26.65%
HS Math: <Algebra 2*	6.79%	15.96%

Did not take SAT *	9.04%	25.70%
SAT Math*	504.84	469.14
SAT Verbal*	501.46	468.32
Live on-Campus	24.77%	1.55%
Live with parents	30.47%	7.63%
Community College	32.90%	45.34%
Public Four-Year	44.96%	26.23%
Private NFP Four-Year	18.75%	14.80%
Proprietary College	3.39%	13.51%

Source: National Postsecondary Student Aid Survey 2008

\* High school academic data is collected in NPSAS08 only for students younger than 30.

Table 2: Majors of adult and traditionally-aged undergraduates, by institutional sector. Numbers represent percentages.

	Community Colleges		Four-Year Schools		Proprietary Colleges		All	
	Traditionally-Aged	Adult	Traditionally-Aged	Adult	Traditionally-Aged	Adult	Traditionally-Aged	Adult
<i>Arts &amp; Sciences</i>								
Humanities	27.31	20.25	14.5	12.98	10.9	4.2	18.58	15.07
Social Sciences	3.77	2.74	12.42	10.32	0.9	1.3	9.17	5.64
Life Sciences	3.76	2.65	10.48	6.11	0.18	0.45	7.91	3.77
Physical Science & Math	1.04	0.72	1.8	1.41	0.01	0.13	2.02	0.93
<i>Vocational Fields</i>								
Engineering & Computers	6.49	7.92	9.26	8.72	18.65	16.61	8.67	9.42
Education	5.79	6.65	7.89	8.53	0.77	1.96	6.95	6.78
Business	14.09	15.25	17.47	25.57	29.42	42.6	16.76	23.14
Health	13.29	21.18	7.17	11.57	16.42	17.6	9.55	16.89

Source: National Postsecondary Student Aid Survey 2008

