



PURM

Perspectives on Undergraduate
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Radical Adaptability: Undergraduate Research with Adult Learners

Stefanie Frigo, Ph.D., North Carolina Central University (sfrigo@nccu.edu)
Collie Fulford, Ph.D., State University of New York at Buffalo

Introduction

Independent adults comprise a significant proportion of the student population in U.S. higher education. We use the term “adult learner” to describe a demographic that is variously labeled (e.g., nontraditional, post-traditional, adult learners, independent), and generally identified by criteria that include age, marital status, military service, employment, financial independence, and/or financial responsibility for dependents (Kasworm, 2018; Langrehr et al., 2015; National Center for Educational Statistics, 2015). Those having at least one of the defining criteria of independence per the Free Application for Federal Aid currently make up more than half of all college students (Cruse et al., 2018).

Despite the prevalence of this heterogeneous group, adult learners remain consistently underserved by undergraduate research (UR) opportunities (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2010; 2014; 2018a). We argue that the complexity of adult learners’ lives should not be a deterrent to involving such students in undergraduate research. Through descriptions of adult student research partners and the sustained projects they have contributed to at one university, this article explains some of the qualities that adult learners bring to research. We also discuss complicating factors that practitioners can expect when adult students join them in mentored research. The article foregrounds a principle of *radical adaptability* that enables adult learners and their faculty mentors to engage in mutually beneficial research activity, thus improving the equitable distribution of such opportunities.

Radical Adaptability

Even at institutions like North Carolina Central University (NCCU) that enroll them in significant numbers, adult students must be highly adaptable. Their perseverance in school requires that they find creative ways to fit classes, jobs, personal pursuits, and family responsibilities around each other. Course schedules change each semester or quarter, so every new session demands that adult learners devise new plans to make progress on their educational goals without dropping the ball on other vital parts of their lives. Furthermore, each semester may mean a new slate of faculty relationships to navigate. What elevates these students’ adaptability to *radical* adaptability is the complexity and pace of the contortions that adult learners make to pursue their studies in institutions that regard their younger, less encumbered classmates as the norm. Adult students’ radical adaptability might entail patching together eldercare and childcare, and/or renegotiating work schedules so they can take the courses required by their academic plan. It may mean testing

the waters during the add/drop period to see if the workload will be realistic. Adult learners ask, is it even possible this semester? What must I adjust to make progress on my academic goals right now? Those who desire the full college experience – such as socializing with classmates, taking an active role in campus organizations, performing in arts productions, and/or being involved in any other activities that enrich college life – make even more adaptations so that they can be students.

As research mentors, we are inspired by these students who somehow add college to their already full lives. We think that adult learners should not always be the ones who change to fit higher education. It is also the responsibility of colleges and universities to adapt to the students they enroll by providing equity in services, teaching and mentorship, and access to enriching opportunities. We extend this to making mentored undergraduate research experiences equally feasible for adult students as they are for others.

Radical adaptability—which we previously define as something students embody—is also a core attribute for faculty. It includes being flexible around adults’ multiple life responsibilities and creative in how we utilize institutional resources and systems designed for other things.

Adult undergraduates’ prospective research mentors come up against some of the same structural impediments that these students do when we attempt to design age-inclusive research opportunities. Our adaptability becomes radical because it runs against the grain of institutional norms by centering adults in an area of higher education where they are rarely served. Our adaptability as research mentors is as radical as that of adult students because we both require a matrix of strategies to work around the rigidities of higher education.

From our experiences conducting research with adult learners over many years, we identify three dimensions of radical adaptability for mentors of adult undergraduate researchers: (1) identifying and repurposing existing institutional structures such as courses and programs; (2) identifying and reimagining uses for emerging opportunities such as grants and partnerships; and (3) deliberately reengineering undergraduate research experiences for and with adult learners. While the first two dimensions rely on the institutional knowledge of faculty, the third dimension is even more critical to the success of adult-inclusive research opportunities because it is met through a mutual exploration of adult learners’ practical needs for accommodation, their desires to use and develop expertise, and the topics of interest most relevant to them.

We acknowledge that this adaptive matrix for ensuring that adult learners can engage in undergraduate research represents labor that is not always recognized by our institutions. However, the faculty-student collaborations that develop from these efforts can be highly rewarding for faculty, and the qualities that adult learners bring to the research enterprise can yield unexpected benefits to the research itself. Furthermore, applying the principle of radical adaptability outlined in this article enables undergraduate research practitioners to serve students who otherwise might not become involved in mentored research.

The Site and the Principal Investigators

North Carolina Central University is a public, historically Black university at which 18% of the undergraduate population is over the age of twenty-four and 80% are Black or African American (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2021). Even students under age twenty-five may juggle significant adult responsibilities such as parenting or being self-supporting. NCCU matches the national average for undergraduate research engagement (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2018a). When the authors were in the early stages of the research collaboration outlined in this article, about a quarter of seniors nationally and at NCCU reported having participated in research with faculty (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2018a, 2018b). At NCCU, 18% of seniors over

twenty-four reported doing so, whereas the national rate for that age group was just 12%. The university's support for undergraduate research is further evident in its McNair Scholars program, an annual graduate and undergraduate research symposium, and the activities of research mentors in multiple departments (see for instance Hammonds, 2021; McClinton et al., 2015). The authors' creation of research opportunities adapted specifically for adult learners arose in this context. Stefanie became interested in adult learners through her work as coordinator of the Interdisciplinary Studies B.A., which attracts many students returning to education after a break. Collie had been an adult undergraduate herself, and she appreciated what adult students at NCCU contributed to her mixed-age classrooms. Both of us had supervised adult learners in independent studies and believed that research conducted about and with this population would be a valuable extension of these interests.

The Student Researchers

Brief profiles of six student researchers ranging from their late twenties to early sixties offer snapshots of the complexities, the promise, and the pleasure of collaborating with adult learners. These students were the first to join us in developing a sustained research agenda about and with adult students at NCCU. Their efforts were continued by a cross-institutional summer undergraduate research team, followed by iterations of course-based research experiences that integrated adult learners and younger student researchers. With their permission, we use the real names of these student co-investigators.

Judy Spruiell had extensive career experience both in human services case work and in software engineering. Judy joined the adult learners research team for one semester while she held a full-time county job and was enrolled part time in our university's criminal justice program. She was also raising a teen at the time. We recruited her for the relevance of these adult experiences and because of her fierce work ethic and mentorship qualities. Other students looked up to her.

Jamal Whitted was a Navy veteran who had started and left school several times over a sixteen-year period. When he joined the team, he had recently earned a degree in mass communications and was completing a second one in interdisciplinary studies. We recruited Jamal for his complex educational biography and his unstoppable energy. He also brought networking connections to several campus offices that serve adult students, including Veterans Affairs and Transfer Services.

Brandon Cutler was a full-time student double majoring in Spanish and social work who had adjusted his studies around significant caregiving responsibilities for a family member. The youngest of the student researchers, Brandon was also a Navy reservist and social work intern during his semester with the team. We recruited him because he had shown exceptional diligence and compassion for others, and he was always looking for opportunities to advance his knowledge.

Stuart Parrish asked to join the research project on adult students after he participated in a focus group run by Judy, Jamal, and Brandon. Stuart was a musician who had previously worked in the medical field and several other employment sectors. He cared for an aging parent while attending school part time as an interdisciplinary studies major. A first-generation college student, his educational history had been exceptionally circuitous. He was the oldest researcher on the project. Stuart brought warm regard for his fellow students and highly intuitive thinking to his research activity, which he conducted both as independent study and during a course-based undergraduate research experience.

Yaseen Abdul-Malik was a full-time history major with a full-time sales position and a new baby. He joined the project as a research intern after volunteering at a regional conference at which Jamal and Stuart presented findings from a study of adult students. Yaseen had lived many years in the

United Arab Emirates before returning to the U.S. to complete his degree. Yaseen's contributions included charismatic outreach skills that manifested in recruitment, interviewing, and speaking about the research.

Thomas Kelly was pointed to the adult learners research project by a departmental internship coordinator. He was a self-employed builder and former restaurant manager attending school part-time and majoring in interdisciplinary studies. After interning for a semester alongside Yaseen, he continued with the project for a second semester as an independent study. He also became a founding member of our university's Adult Learners Student Organization and was elected its treasurer while on the research team.

These student researchers represent six different majors and experience in at least twice as many employment sectors. They contributed intellectual breadth, practical skills, social connections, and insider understandings of participants' perspectives. Even though most served on the project for just one semester, these adult students performed complex research activities covering almost all stages of the study, including co-constructing the study design, recruiting participants, collecting data, performing iterative analysis, and disseminating findings within and beyond the university. Given the responsibilities each shouldered outside of school, they might seem like an unlikely group to become involved in undergraduate research. However, their desire to contribute and our collective willingness to adapt enable us to co-construct workable opportunities that benefited all of us—students, faculty, and the research itself.

Adult Learner Engagement in Undergraduate Research

Advocates for high impact practices routinely call for reducing barriers to access for underserved students (DelliCarpini et al., 2020; Finley & McNair, 2013; Kuh, 2008). Most equity-oriented scholarship about undergraduate research focuses on improving undergraduate research rates of engagement for minoritized racial and ethnic populations (Boyd et al., 2009; Jones et al., 2010; McClinton et al., 2015; O'Donnell et al., 2015). This is an important priority, yet age difference is also a crucial area for equity efforts. The National Survey of Student Engagement (2010; 2014; 2018a) shows that students over the age of twenty-four are consistently among the least served by UR initiatives in the United States, participating at about half the rate of their younger classmates. This is despite adults' high rates of college enrollment (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2018).

Unequal undergraduate research participation might be rationalized as a logical result of the competing time commitments of adult learners (Wladis et al., 2023). Some scholars speculate that students who have adult responsibilities outside of school may consider UR to be a "luxury" (Zilvinskis & McCormick, 2019, p.543). Others note that because of off-campus obligations and prior socialization into community life, adult students typically focus their academic engagement on curricular activities rather than the kinds of out of class experiences advocated by Kuh (2008) and tracked by the National Survey of Student Engagement (Kasworm, 2014). Yet having worked with many adult students who found research opportunities to be worth their time, we urge prospective mentors not to make assumptions about the availability or interest of these students. The few studies of UR that discuss adult students indicate that offering appropriate mentoring and flexibility can enable members of this population to thrive as undergraduate researchers (Abraha & Kanis, 2009; Greer, 2010; Njumbwa, 2008; Shanahan, 2018; Thompson & Jensen-Ryan, 2018). Furthermore, this scholarship indicates that because of their experiences, skills, and attitudes, adult learners bring significant value to mentored research projects. Our experiences as research mentors confirm both the importance of adapting projects to accommodate adults' complex lives and the potential for these students to alter research for the better.

The Research Projects

Two interrelated research projects conducted at North Carolina Central University (NCCU) illustrate how practicing the principle of radical adaptability can enable adult students to gain research experience while meaningfully contributing to knowledge production. Adult learners are the subjects of these studies, so involving them as insider research partners was a logical decision for us. However, we believe that adult learners' qualities as research collaborators would also be valuable in any areas of study.

Learning for Adult Learners

Our first study in what has become a sustained adult learners research agenda investigates adult students' reasons for leaving and returning to college. Results show a spectrum of life circumstances that shape non-linear educational histories and are consistent with much research about adult student attrition, retention, and persistence (Goncalves & Trunk, 2014; Samuels et al., 2011; Wyatt, 2011). These factors include employment, health problems, financial issues, and caregiving responsibilities, and they pertain to student co-investigators on the research teams just as they do to participants in the studies. Like participants, adult undergraduate researchers need to be able to do college on their own terms. This means that school must fit around other pressing responsibilities. However, their schooling—including engagement in UR—is informed by their adult experiences.

The Learning from Adult Learners project took shape in response to an internal request for proposals to fund interdisciplinary project teams. The RFP was initiated through the Office of Academic Affairs. Selected projects would need to “spark innovations in academic programs to foster growth, enhance the distinction of NCCU, and improve student development.” We aligned our proposal to that last point, student development, noting that findings from the study could inform future policies and practices regarding this important population. We sought to understand what made it possible for adult students at our university to continue their studies and what made it difficult. We also wanted to know what meanings adult students made of their higher education histories.

Adult students pose a paradox for higher education administrators. On the one hand, some institutions regard them as a desirable market, especially as they seek to manage diminishing enrollments of traditional aged students (Grawe, 2018). On the other hand, adults' enrollment patterns include more part time and noncontinuous semesters than those of their younger classmates (Cruse et al., 2018). This latter attribute makes overreliance on adult enrollment risky for institutions because prevalent measures of institutional success (such as first to second year retention and years to degree completion) are based on assumptions about students who have fewer complex responsibilities (Reichert Powell, 2013). The challenge for administrators is thus to boost undergraduate enrollments without extending time to completion. Our project proposal therefore capitalized on concerns about adult enrollment that we predicted would resonate with academic affairs administrators. While we ourselves were more interested in the students' lives than their enrollment patterns, adapting the proposal to align it with an institutional need earned the endorsements of key personnel in academic affairs, strategic planning, and advising.

We further reimagined this funding opportunity so that we could pay stipends to three adult undergraduate research assistants from multiple disciplines. Including students as researchers on the project was crucial for transforming the study from one that primarily reflected an administrative gaze on students to one that integrated insider student-researcher perspectives into as many aspects of the study as possible. Those who promote students as partners in revising curriculum and teaching identify collaboration between faculty and students as a way to multiply perspectives on educational problems (Cook-Sather, 2013; Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017). Educational research partnerships with students are equally valuable for similar reasons (Maunder et al., 2013). We wanted this project to reflect multiple kinds of expertise; a team approach that tapped different cultural, disciplinary, personal, and workforce knowledge might be relevant to shaping a study that

could raise institutional awareness about the heterogeneity of adult students and, ideally, alter the ways the institution served such students. We hoped that a participatory research model would also mitigate the effects of cultural distance between us, the white principal investigators, and the predominantly Black members of the student body. Fine identifies the potential for such research coalitions to create “delicate spaces of collective criticality” (2018, p. 117) that are sustaining for those involved, generate community, and result in meaningful action.

It was with these hopes that we recruited the first three students, Judy, Jamal, and Brandon, from among the adult undergraduates we each knew personally. The terms of our funded proposal provided an initial structure of responsibilities. However, because this extracurricular activity had to fit around full-time coursework and adult responsibilities for all five of us, it was challenging to find regular meeting times. Our earliest challenges in mutually reengineering the undergraduate research partnership were about scheduling. Jury duty, job responsibilities, family caregiving, and other non-negotiables interfered, but we maintained our joint commitment to the project through flexible accommodation and frequent communication. To adapt to the complexities of our student research partners’ lives, Collie and Stefanie identified work that could be accomplished around other commitments on the students’ own terms. Training and testing protocols were two such activities. It was also important for us to schedule the most important collaborative events—such as focus groups—with rigorous attention to what the student researchers needed. Students participated in training for human subjects research through a standardized online certification course. They then, as able, attended customized research methods lessons led by Collie and Stefanie and other university stakeholders. For instance, the university’s director of strategic planning conducted a workshop for the team on how to design and lead focus groups. The whole team then designed the protocol together.

After one mentored session in which Stefanie and Collie attended the focus group as recorders, the three adult undergraduate researchers—Jamal, Judy, and Brandon—took charge of the next two focus groups without us present. It was immediately evident that removing the professors from the room enhanced the sense of community between student researchers and student participants: they all shared the identity of adult students who were in the midst of their higher education experiences. Recordings from the students-only sessions demonstrate deeply collegial communication among peers. We conducted full team debriefings after each focus group to discuss emerging findings, one of which was how meaningful the participants seemed to find attending these events. Participants stayed long after the recorders were off, noting that it was rare for adult students to be the focus of a gathering, and they had a lot to say to each other. From this, the team decided that the concept of “belonging” would be important to investigate further in surveys and interviews. Thus, our research partners demonstrated resoundingly that making accommodations for their complex adult lives was well worth it; they brought significant value to the project as insiders who could create rapport with peer participants. Their positionality further anchored their interpretations of what mattered in the emerging findings.

Stuart, a student who participated in the spring 2018 focus group, requested a researcher role on the project. Because we no longer could offer the tangible value of a stipend, he opted for course credit on an independent study that could satisfy a senior-level requirement for his interdisciplinary studies major. He focused on correcting and interpreting transcripts from the 2018 focus groups and interviews. His contribution also included autoethnographic dimensions; he documented observations and reflections about his own experiences as an older student. Stuart’s insights helped identify additional significant themes in the lives of his classmates, including tension between the relatively subservient role expected of undergraduates compared to the levels of responsibility and authority that these adults experience outside of school in their homes, workplaces, and communities. This dissonance is one reason that being treated as research partners is especially

meaningful for adult students. For faculty researchers, the benefits of following the lead of adult student collaborators include discovering new purposes and audiences for the work.

For instance, diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) professionals were not an audience Stefanie and Collie had anticipated for the scholarship emerging from the study, but it was one that Stuart's independent investigations revealed as important; he learned from interviewing NCCU's diversity officer that age difference was not broadly considered to be within the purview of DEI. We adapted our plans for dissemination accordingly. In the summer of 2019, Jamal and Stuart presented with Collie at a regional DEI conference. Using findings from the study, we argued that adult learners are a relevant population for university diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) professionals to consider in their advocacy work (Fulford et al., 2019). We discussed our survey of over one hundred students, identifying the major reasons adults reported pausing their studies. The dominant responses included family caregiving responsibilities, financial difficulties, employment conflicts with school, and health problems, as well as a matrix of other factors that reflected the heterogeneity of the adult student population and why they would benefit from advocacy. Stuart and Jamal contributed personal dimensions to the quantitative survey results by identifying their positionality as both adult learners and researchers who had distinctive stories of their own, thus further illustrating the complexity of adults' higher education experiences. This was the first time either one had presented at an academic conference, and the DEI audience proved receptive.

The Writing Lives of Adult HBCU Students

A closely related project initiated two years later built upon the Learning from Adult Learners findings about the rich domains of adult students' experiential knowledge. This project's goal was to comprehensively understand the writing lives of adult students. Given that older students have a wealth of personal and professional experiences outside academics, what connections might they make between academic writing knowledge and these other areas of communication? When initially describing this study on fellowship applications, Collie did not identify this phase of research as collaborative. Humanities fellowships tend to assume solo scholarship, and they are funded accordingly. The terms of the fellowship that Collie was awarded were not flexible enough to directly pay for student researcher stipends. However, a student's enthusiasm for the project when he met the team at the DEI conference prompted Collie to think about alternative ways Yaseen Abdul-Malik could be involved and appropriately compensated. Thus, the radical adaptations continued. Yaseen and Collie brainstormed a method that would help him satisfy graduation requirements by repurposing an internship course that was designed for English majors. The internship course director asked Collie to consider adding another adult student, Thomas Kelly, to the project, and thus the fifth and sixth adult undergraduates joined the adult learners research team in a manner that utilizes three dimensions of radical adaptability: (1) We repurposed an existing course, (2) we reimagined how a solo fellowship opportunity could facilitate collaborative research, and (3) we jointly re-engineered the study to make it a research learning opportunity that adjusted to the learning priorities and existing strengths of each intern. Like the research assistants before them, Yaseen and Thomas also presented findings at a regional conference (Abdul-Malik et al., 2019). They, too, sometimes struggled to fit this work in around myriad other responsibilities. They, too, provided unique sensitivity to the issues and priorities expressed by participants.

Collie subsequently incorporated interviews conducted by Yaseen, Thomas, and herself into a composition theory course that she transformed into a course-based undergraduate research experience (CURE). Stuart enrolled in it and emerged as a research leader within the mixed-age group because he was already familiar with some of the qualitative analysis strategies Collie taught the class. His experiences working on the previous study made it possible for him to serve as an embedded research assistant who could support his classmates' learning of analytical techniques, even though Collie had not anticipated this assistance during the course planning phase. Bit by bit,

the project thus continued to take new directions like this because of adaptations we made on the fly.

Research Pathways for Students

There are multiple ways that adult learners become involved in undergraduate research both on and off the campus of North Carolina Central University. The variety and scope of the opportunities that students participate in ties directly into the idea that to provide practical and meaningful options for adult learners, mentors must practice the principle of radical adaptability. These options include undergraduate research opportunities that offer academic credit, satisfy graduation requirements, provide financial remuneration, and/or allow adult learners to participate in the greater academic community of which they are members. Although such options can impact both faculty teaching load and time, we feel the rewards far outweigh these considerations.

Academic Course Opportunities

Adult learners on the NCCU projects have co-developed several credit-bearing arrangements to engage in undergraduate research through independent study, credit-bearing internships, and course-based research experiences adapted to their situations. A highly flexible option for adult learners engaged in undergraduate research is to participate in the project as a student enrolled in an independent study that they take for course credit towards graduation. Independent study allows the student to develop and conduct the research at times that are flexible and potentially outside the regular scheduling of classes; this adaptability is one of the most fundamental ways in which the undergraduate research experience can be made more accessible for adult learners. Independent study also allows for individual educational needs to be met in a way that is not possible in traditional class settings and for a personalized syllabus to be created with the student enrolled in the course. This approach ensures that not only that the research project goals met, but also that the contributions each student participant can make are fully maximized, as adult learners bring a wealth of experience and talent to the table that may go underutilized in other classroom settings.

A variation on the independent study option is the internship course, in which the adult learner/researcher enrolls in the course and chooses an internship site. NCCU offers a senior level Writing Intensive (WI) internship course, thus potentially satisfying both a major requirement and the broader graduation requirement of upper-level writing credit. Internship opportunities are offered at a wide variety of workplaces and institutions, with participation in undergraduate research now instituted as one of the options because of our studies. Students are required to complete ten hours of writing per week at their chosen internship, with the instructor of record monitoring and mentoring them as they move through the class.

In the internship, a student may work on a single aspect of a larger project and be assigned elements that are best suited to their skills, experience, and aspirations. This may be organized either alone or in small research teams, depending on the number of positions available at the internship site. Again, this approach is a valuable option in terms of its inherent flexibility and is particularly useful for longitudinal and longer-term projects. It permits students to participate for a period of time, but they do not necessarily have to commit to the whole project. It also plays on the individual educational interests and technical expertise of the student researchers, another avenue through which adult learners may bring more to the table than traditional learners.

A third course type that lends itself to adaptation for mixed-age research teams is a research capstone. As part of the Interdisciplinary Studies B.A. program at NCCU, students are required to take a capstone seminar in interdisciplinary research. The research capstone is another example of the ways in which alternative thinking regarding course and program design embodies radical adaptability. While simultaneously satisfying a graduation requirement of the Interdisciplinary

Studies program, the senior seminar class allows undergraduate researchers of all ages the opportunity to participate in significant mentored research experiences during their final semesters at the university. Since the course is a required element of the Interdisciplinary Studies Program, students who would not typically apply for mentored UG research experiences have the opportunity to participate in this high-impact practice. The course is rigorous, with robust research training, such as CITI Human Subjects Research Certification, qualitative and quantitative approaches to data analysis, literature searches and reviews, and the communication of results in scholarly settings. Rather than having students design and implement their personal research agendas—an approach that can often lead to students developing surface level projects due to a lack of time—the capstone adapts a pre-existing course structure to serve as a vehicle for undergraduate researchers to contribute to a longitudinal study.

Funding Opportunities

One way to increase opportunities for adult learners to participate in undergraduate research is through the creation of student stipends as an integral part of grants. Adult learners find themselves in the position of juggling the different parts of their lives—work, caregiving, health issues, and community commitments—in ways that tend to impact traditional students less. Providing financial support to these students as they undertake their research can make the difference between participating in the experience and not.

At NCCU, stipends were written into an internal grant that provided the funding for the first segment of adult learner research—the Learning from Adult Learners Project—allowing us to hire three part-time undergraduate researchers, Brandon, Jamal, and Judy, for one semester. As described in the section on research projects, the undergraduate researchers who participated in the project had significant roles in designing, testing, and implementing the survey tools and protocols for focus groups and interviews. This inclusion of the student researchers in the creative process demonstrates how using the approach of radical adaptability can lead to powerful investigative techniques; adult learners bring a great deal to research projects when they can afford to join them.

Academic Community Opportunities

One of the most significant experiences for undergraduate researchers is presenting their findings at local, regional, and national academic conferences. Particularly when undergraduate researchers have delved into topics that are relevant to them, the process of actively participating in the academic community that they are a part of is of huge benefit. As noted previously, when Jamal and Stuart co-presented with Collie, they were in the unique position of being able to offer not only their research findings, but also their own lived experiences as adult learners. This symbiosis—being simultaneously researchers and also part of the research study—is an example of the ways in which participatory undergraduate research for Adult Learners takes a radical approach. As experts both because of their research and also because of their own experiences navigating the challenges of returning to education as adult learners, Jamal and Stuart offer perspectives that are often missing from studies about adult learners.

In keeping with the principles of radical adaptability, in Fall 2019, Collie and Stefanie submitted a proposal for a Story+ Project through the John Hope Franklin Humanities Institute at Duke University. HBCU Counterstories: Going Public with the Experiences of Adult Students was designed to further represent the perspectives and lived experiences of adult learners from NCCU. Applications were open to students from both North Carolina Central University and Duke University, as one of our goals was to foster an inter-institutional research team.

Although the global Coronavirus pandemic changed the terms under which the research team operated and moved the project from a face-to-face mentored research project to a remote data

collection and analysis experience, the four new student researchers still forged a team identity and benefited from the inter-institutional aspects of Story+. Again, we designed the experience around a pre-existing research paradigm focusing on the lived experiences of adult learners. This segment of the project enabled student researchers to learn interpretive methods for presenting findings and statistics, and to develop authentic representations of adult learners while examining the extent to which adult learners and HBCUs are present in public narratives.

We anticipate making further resourceful adaptations to acquire funding and build community as we continue our adult learners research agenda. For instance, we will investigate leveraging Federal Work-Study to augment student researchers' pay. We will also seek ways to involve our student research partners in the national undergraduate research conversation through the conferences and workshops designed for this purpose.

Tenets for Action

As we navigated the changing landscape of academic programming, funding opportunities, and student responsibilities, it became clear to us that in developing our principle of radical adaptability, there were certain forces driving our decision-making. Radical adaptability is a deeply personal approach to developing undergraduate research opportunities for and with adult learners, and adult learners have unique circumstances that govern their ability to participate and their flexibility in participation in research. We strove to ensure that our students could gain the maximum from their experiences with us. From our ongoing experiments in these collaborations, we offer four key tenets to inform the radical adaptability of prospective research mentors and their adult student teams.

Tangible Value

A recurring theme in conversation with adult learners is that although their time is precious, they want to gain as much from their undergraduate experience as possible in the time that they have. Undergraduate research can be made worthwhile for these students by coupling it to educational elements that already have tangible value. Course credit for engagement in undergraduate research is one of the easiest ways this goal can be achieved, as adult learners are more likely to pursue UR opportunities if it is through a mechanism by which they can get closer to the earned hours needed for graduation. Similarly, if undergraduate research opportunities can also satisfy further graduation requirements—think capstone courses, writing intensive requirements, or senior level course requirements—adult learners will gain more from the experience. Remuneration for participation in undergraduate research also achieves a number of goals: many students must work to support themselves through their education, and research indicates that students who work on campus are more likely than those who do not to participate in undergraduate research experiences (Zivlinski & McCormick, 2019). There is also the added value of demonstrating the financial worth of what they are doing. A significant number of institutions, NCCU included, also have a service hour requirement for graduation: awarding service hours to students participating in undergraduate research opportunities provides adult learners with additional motivation to choose these options.

Practical, Mutual Process

In addition to expressing a desire to gain as much as possible from their time as undergraduates, many adult learners also express an element of frustration because their institution tends to focus on traditional, on-campus students, often directing investment and programming towards the needs of these students as an item of first importance. Adult learners find that their access to university services, on-campus offices, and student life programming is reduced because they work during the day and take their classes in the evening, or otherwise have to balance work, family, and educational commitments, leaving little time for other aspects of campus life. It is essential, therefore, that undergraduate research opportunities for adult learners take these barriers into account. It is crucial that principal investigators and adult learner researchers work from a perspective of mutual

adaptability, governing aspects of research projects relating to timing (in terms of how much time adult learners can reasonably be expected to dedicate to a project), scheduling (as in when research can take place), and location (alternative and off-campus venues should also be in the mix). By ensuring maximum flexibility and a willingness on both sides to think creatively, the likelihood of adult learners' participation in these projects is increased.

Emotional Value

One of the aspects of the undergraduate experience that many adult learners may miss out on because of extensive work and family commitments is the feeling of being part of the greater university community. In addition to decrying lack of access to some campus services, many of these students also express their desire to find ways to feel more connected to the fabric of campus life. Adult learners are often more driven and engaged in their learning than traditional students, as their goals and their time are perhaps more defined, but they also seek more meaning in the additional opportunities they look for on campus. In many of the interviews we undertook as part of the Learning from Adult Learners Project, participants spoke of their desire to find their community on campus and to actively strengthen and contribute to this community of adult learners. Where research projects have a high subject matter relevance for the participants, in the case of adult learners, this aspect of undergraduate research is further enhanced. Adult learners should be afforded the opportunity to engage in research that they find meaningful and emotionally valuable to themselves and others like them so that they can further develop their community as an integral part of campus life.

Lasting Structural Change

This move to define and develop a sense of community for the adult learners on campus is one way that undergraduate research opportunities for adult learners can contribute to lasting structural change within the university, addressing the needs and goals of adult learners in a way that is sustainable and student-driven. Through the creation of well-structured, flexible, and forward-thinking undergraduate research opportunities that are designed with the needs of the adult learner community in mind, we are enhancing the likelihood of these students staying in education, organizing together to create community on campus, and taking larger roles in campus life. The traditional landscape of the university community is changing fast, and it is essential to develop policy and resources that will create lasting opportunities for a sector of the undergraduate population that has often experienced marginalization within the education system, from their elementary experiences right through to their reentry into university. Part of the need of adult learners to find and sustain their community on campus, to find their sense of belonging, must stem in part from their earlier experiences within the education system: if these students have often found themselves on the outside and have struggled to find themselves on the inside, it is powerful and transformative to create opportunities for them to find their voices.

Conclusion

The ultimate goal for practitioners of UR should be to serve our students equitably and to reduce barriers to access for underserved student populations, and historically, adult students have often been left on the outside. The radically adaptive process for achieving equitable ends is both challenging and profoundly rewarding, and it is rich in insights for adult learners and faculty and staff who support these endeavors. In challenging the academic status quo for adult learners and their experiences of undergraduate research, we believe that the whole process is enriched for adult learners and for faculty researchers. Adult learners bring a wealth of life experience, qualifications, and diverse abilities to the research process. In disrupting the traditional UR model and radically adapting institutional structures, funding opportunities, and partnerships, we forge a version of UR that is truly open to all.

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