

Learning for life

In many ways and for myriad reasons, adults are heading back to class

By Sally Reed

Charles Comes Killing injured his back while managing a truck stop near Kyle, S.D., on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation. While recuperating, he entered college as a means to find a new occupation and, as he said, "I just kept going."

First, he earned an associate's degree in entrepreneurship from Oglala Lakota College on the reservation. But he didn't stop there.

Comes Killing (right) is now completing a bachelor of science degree in natural resources "because I am concerned about our area here," he added. In fact, he now works at the tribal college's geographical lab, using satellite technology to map the entire reservation.



"It is a preservation program," he explained, "mapping and gathering information on resources and on cultural sites so that buffer zones can be established around them and they can be protected from development." Furthermore, he has entered a certificate program in television production and hopes to help establish a TV station on the reservation.

(continued)

ADULT LEARNING

"It kept snowballing," Comes Killing said of his postsecondary pursuit. "I gradually picked up more and more classes. I just keep pushing on. ... No matter how tough it is, it's going to pay off in the end. And it has enriched my life."

Comes Killing is just one of a growing number of adults pursuing postsecondary education. They do it for a variety of reasons: to land new jobs, change careers, upgrade skills, gain personal satisfaction — even to serve as a role model for their children.

According to a September 2004 study by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), some 98 million Americans — 49 percent of the nation's adults — participated in some type of "formal" (that is, instructor-led) education in 2000-2001. Although a large majority of these students were enrolled in work-related courses and personal-interest courses rather than in college or university degree programs, the adult student population has long been increasing on campus — both in actual numbers and as a percentage of total enrollment.

In 1970, 2.4 million students age 25 and older were enrolled in degree-granting institutions, according to NCES. By 1980, that number had increased to 4.5 million and, by 1990, it was nearly 5.8 million. In 2000, it grew to almost 6 million — a number representing 43 percent of American undergraduates. And adult enrollment for this age group is projected to be more than 6.7 million by 2012. By that time, according to the American Council on Education, more than half the student population will be over 25.

"There are so many adults in higher education today that the nontraditional student is becoming traditional," said David O. Justice, vice president for lifelong learning at DePaul University in Chicago.

Historical perspective

Of course, adult students are nothing new. Immigrant adults have gone to school to learn English since the 1800s. In 1887, Sinclair Community College began classes for adult males working in the factories of Dayton, Ohio. After World War II, hundreds of thousands of adult veterans became first-time college students, thanks to the GI Bill. Law and business schools have long offered night programs for working adults.

Many of the programs we know today, however, evolved in the 1970s at colleges and universities that saw adults' needs weren't being met. Many of the programs now in existence took shape then at institutions such as the School for New Learning at DePaul University in Chicago; Empire State College in Saratoga Springs, N.Y.; the School of New Resources at the College of New Rochelle in New York; and Alverno College in Milwaukee.

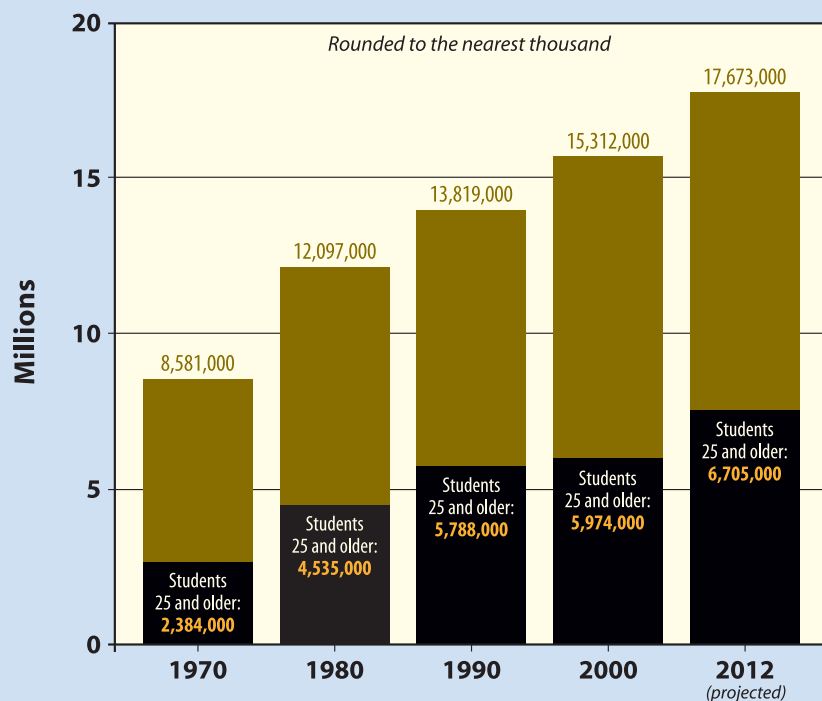
"Many of the adult programs started out as reform efforts to open up colleges and universities and increase access to a wider variety of students," said Catherine Marienau, a professor at DePaul's School for New Learning (SNL) and co-author of *Developing Adult Learners* (Jossey-Bass, 2000).

SNL began in 1971 and is regarded as a national model. Indeed, it helped define much of the language that now surrounds the education of adult learners. It operates what is called a "competency-based" interdisciplinary program where students receive credit for assessed prior learning. Students design their own majors and pursue bachelor's and master's degrees in liberal arts. Currently, SNL has about 3,200 students.

According to Dean Susanne Dumbleton, "about 90

Fall enrollment in degree-granting institutions, 1970-2012

Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics





Charles Comes Killing is a businessman as well as a student. He and his uncle, Cecil Cross (right), make and sell traditional Lakota drums — an enterprise they began after Comes Killing first earned an associate's degree in entrepreneurship at Oglala Lakota College on the Pine Ridge Reservation.

percent" of the adults on her campus are there "to advance, enhance or change their career. ... Invariably, they are coming back to school for practical reasons," Dumbleton said, "but it also results in extraordinary personal satisfaction."

Adult programs are now found in diverse types of institutions, from business schools to community colleges. A growing number of degrees are offered online — proving that the traditional campus location isn't the only place you'll find today's adult students. "They are in many other settings, including the workplace," said Pamela Tate, who began working with adults in the 1970s at the State University of New York and is now president and CEO of the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL).

Tate points out that, in her long experience, "some things have definitely changed, and one is the recognition on the part of employers that workforce learning is critical to their success. That idea has made its way into senior levels of companies, and you see much more investment on the part of firms than you did 20 or 30 years ago."

She added: "There is more responsiveness from both two- and four-year colleges. If you look around for adult programs, there are many more of them. And there are many more for-profit providers competing for the adult learner than when I started."

What are they waiting for?

For many adult students, perhaps a fair question to ask is:

"Why now? Why not earlier?" Why are they pursuing post-secondary education years — even decades — after high school? The reasons are many, and they're cited often by higher education researchers: insufficient academic preparation before college, disparate graduation rates among various ethnic groups, problems with retention once students enroll, poor career counseling, inadequate training in new technologies ... the list goes on. In addition, some students have delayed or been forced to abandon their education for financial reasons. The rising cost of tuition (up more than 50 percent at public four-year institutions over the last 10 years) has profound effects, especially on students from low- and middle-income families.

Despite these impediments, however, a variety of social and economic forces are propelling adults into the classroom — some as returning students, others for their first postsecondary experience. Among those forces: changing workforce requirements, the dot-com bust, the economic downturn, the desire among aging baby boomers to lengthen their careers — even the 9/11 tragedy, which led some soul searchers to reinvent their lives.

Whatever their motivation, adults are heading to class in droves. And when they get there, they want schools and schedules that accommodate their busy lives, with flexible programs that give them credit for what they already know.

Sinclair Community College in Dayton, Ohio, is one such place.