

A Time Between: The Full-Time Adult Undergraduate

A Sample Qualitative Research Proposal Written in the APA 6th Style

[Note: This sample proposal is based on a composite of past proposals, simulated information and references, and material I've included for illustration purposes – it is based roughly on fairly standard research proposal; I say roughly because there is no one set way of doing a qualitative research proposal. Much of its design is based on the nature of the research, your preferences, and your decisions about how to describe or portray what it is you plan to accomplish. The material in this document was adopted primarily from a dissertation proposal created by Dr. Nancy Gadbow. A biography is not included in this sample proposal. To examine ways of creating references in the APA format and other suggestions for using the APA stylistic guide, see <http://www-distance.syr.edu/apa6th.html> or <http://www-distance.syr.edu/apa6th.pdf> . Roger Hiemstra]

Introduction

In recent years an increasing number of adult students are on college campuses seeking undergraduate degrees, filling some of the seats formerly occupied by the traditional, 18-22-year-old students (Apps, 1981; Cross, 1981; Leckie, 1988). Cross (1981) notes that part-time students make up the greater part of this increase. Indeed the number of full-time adult students is still quite small, particularly at four-year colleges and universities. While universities are noticing the presence of mature adults in their full-time study sequences, the number of adults interested and available for full-time study is still small (Rauch, 1991, p. 11).

It is this small number of full-time adult undergraduates that interests me, because there is the distinct possibility that this group will continue to grow in numbers. As the economic picture has changed dramatically in recent years, the number of adults "available" for full-time study has also changed. Certainly the increased unemployment figures, as well as the declining job opportunities available in many regions of the country, have affected this number.

In addition to the loss of a job and the possible need for additional education to obtain new skills, other factors are present:

- the decision to enter the job market and the need to "brush up" or develop new skills
- early retirement and the decision to embark on another career
- a change in one's life situation (divorce, widowhood), which results in a career decision and the corresponding need for additional education
- increased acceptability for adults, particularly women, to return to school (Apps, 1981).

Reports in the literature and conversations with many adult students confirm that colleges and universities still have not really come to terms with these older learners. Although some institutions have added special counseling and orientation programs and have offered varied course schedules and formats, other important areas have been largely ignored. Since the full-time adult undergraduate has been considered as a rare phenomenon, the attention has been centered on part-time students. Therefore, almost none of the support services and structural

changes which have been added for adult learners affect those adults who enter regular "day" full-time undergraduate programs. Generally colleges have continued to treat these occasional full-time adults in the same manner as the majority of traditional-aged students are treated.

Predictions are that the number of adults beginning or returning to college will continue to increase (Apps, 1981; Bowen, 1980; Dewey, 1980; Smith, 2004). Recent awareness of this increase in adult students has resulted in a growing interest by some colleges and universities who recognize their importance--at least economically! Both governmental and educational planners have been considering the impact of these adults on post-secondary education (Kyle, 2001). For colleges and universities seeking to meet the needs of a growing population of adults, there is much yet to be learned!

The Purpose of the Study

The intent of the proposed study is to learn about adult full-time students, their circumstances, experiences, and the nature of their social world. The focus will be on selected adult undergraduates who are enrolled full time at Central College (a pseudonym for a small, private four-year college in the Northeast) during the academic years of 2009-2010 and 2010-2011.

Who are these adult students? Why are they in college? What has been the impact of being a full-time undergraduate upon their lives, and upon their interactions on and off campus with friends and family and with the people they meet on campus? How has their relationships with family and friends affected their decision to go to and stay in college and their experiences as full-time students? What support do they have from family and friends? Finally, what types of groups or social networks have they developed during their time as an adult undergraduate?

These are the central questions of the study. I no doubt will add more questions as I proceed through the research process and obtain more clarity on what it means to be a full-time adult student. The focus will be on the adult students, themselves, and each question or concern I have will be examined from their perspectives.

It is anticipated from the review of literature I have completed thus far that I will learn much. First, it is anticipated that certain aspects of both research and practice in higher education will be challenged. This study should examine a number of circumstances in which the growing principles of adult education, such as recognition of the contributions of the life experiences of adult learners and their individual learning needs, are seen in conflict with established patterns of traditional higher education, such as the maintenance of a hierarchy in which faculty are superior to and dominant over traditional-aged students, the way adult students are taught, and the kinds of support given to adult undergraduate students.

It is also important to examine some more basic issues, such as the nature and purpose of higher education, and the role of educational institutions within the community and society. To adequately serve adult learners, colleges and universities need to look beyond their demographic characteristics to see these individuals, their perceptions, social worlds, and experiences from their own perspectives.

This study also will help call attention to the differences between full-time and part-time adult learners. The experience of the person taking one course one night a week is contrasted with that of the individual enrolled in a full-time "day" program within a setting of primarily traditional-aged students. When adult learners report that they feel uncomfortable in the campus community, colleges need to ask themselves what role and responsibility they have and if there are ways they could influence the nature of the "fit."

Adult education literature has tended to focus on the part-time adult learner as "typical," and thereby has largely excluded or ignored the full-time student. Models and conceptual frameworks which are emerging in adult education to help us understand adult learners, therefore, may well be inadequate for understanding full-time students.

This study will use a framework and perspectives from which to view these learners and their situations within the context of this particular temporary period in each of their lives. The growing body of literature dealing with adult developmental stages or phases and adult transitions also will serve as background for the study. This literature area's theories are generally inadequate as a base from which to view adult full-time learners. As an unexpected, untypical adult experience, full-time study usually cannot be placed on chronological continua or fit into other categories of adult development (Havighurst, 1979; McCoy, 1996, Levenson, 2002).

Therefore, throughout this study a number of factors regarding the experience of full-time undergraduate study from the perspective of the adult learners, themselves, will be examined. The result should be a fresh and more complete picture of the learner and the period of learning, presented in light of several themes and a broad theoretical framework. If colleges and universities clearly recognize and consider as a whole the findings and perspectives offered from this study, they should be able to review many of their current policies and programs.

Finally, it is anticipated that based on the findings, those college administrators interested in meeting the needs of students of all ages will explore different structural and educational approaches to encourage the development of informal social interactions and networks on the campus among adults, older and younger students, and students and faculty. They also may be willing to explore new ways to recruit, teach, and support faculty who work with the full-time adult learner.

Definitions

For this study, there are two terms that need to be defined:

1. **Adult Full Time Student** – An adult full time student is defined as anyone 25 years of age or older who has not had prior college experience, who makes the decision to go to college full-time, and who has completed at least two years of full-time study at the time she or he is interviewed for this study.
2. **Full Time Study** – Full time study is defined as enrolled in a minimum of 11 undergraduate credits each term during at least two regular semesters each year.

Nature and Limitations of the Study

The proposed study follows a qualitative research approach, involving the use of the semi-structured interview as the primary method. It involves a preliminary descriptive examination of the perceptions and experiences of adult full-time undergraduates. It will be limited to no more than 30 subjects at one four-year college because of the time constraints involved in interviewing and subsequent data analysis.

Design of the Study

This section describes the setting, research perspective, study design, and procedures followed.

Setting

Central College began in the middle of the nineteenth century as a liberal arts college, offering a course of study and degree requirements similar to those of other liberal arts colleges. Extension courses were offered to both men and women as early as the 1920's. Eventually a program of Continuing Education evolved which offered both undergraduate and graduate courses. In the late 1960's, providing educational opportunities for the community became a permanent part of the mission of the college.

Central College has kept its tradition as a liberal arts college while preparing students of all ages for a lifetime of careers. The full-time "day" undergraduate program has traditionally served the 18-22 year-old population. In recent years a very small number of students 25 years of age and older have enrolled as full-time students. This is in contrast to the Continuing Education division which offers undergraduate and graduate programs to part-time students of all ages (approximately 3000 students in the 2011-2012 academic year).

The goal of this project will be to study these full-time undergraduates 25 years of age or older with respect to their social world and the factors which affect the nature of their interactions. A convenience sample of no more than 30 students will be obtained by placing an ad in the school newspaper describing the research and requesting people to participate. An inducement of \$50 off of the next bookstore purchase will be offered as compensation (the researcher is an administrator at Central College and received permission from the bookstore director to provide the inducement). Each person who agrees to interview will be asked to read and sign an informed consent form prior to participating and promised their complete anonymity.

Research Perspective

A qualitative research approach is proposed for this study. The theoretical perspective most often associated with qualitative researchers is phenomenology (Bogdan & Biklen, 2004). Following the phenomenological approach, researchers seek to understand meaning in events and in human interactions. Further, the context is important to the interpretation of data. This approach requires that the researcher "centers on the attempt to achieve a sense of the meaning that others give to their own situations" (Smith, 2005, p. 12).

A number of qualitative researchers have affirmed the importance of the perspective of the subjects and how they view their world (Bogdan & Taylor, 2002; Blumer, 1999; Mezirow, Darkenwald, & Knox, 1995; Rock, 1999; Rockhill, 2003; Smith, 2000). Questions of reliability and validity have been raised sometimes in regard to qualitative research methods. However, it is possible to carefully and objectively study the subjective. Glaser and Strauss (1967) stress thorough and systematic procedures to be followed. Blumer (1969) describes both the data collection and analysis as demanding and rigorous processes in which the researcher continually tests and revises images and conceptions.

The orientation of the researcher to the subject is critical to the success of the study. Bosk (1999) calls the privilege of being an observer or interviewer as "a gift presented to the researcher by his or her host or subjects" (p. 203). Awareness of this "gift relationship" helps the researcher to deal with possible personal biases or prejudices. The "lone researcher" can minimize potential problems by thoughtful review and self-examination throughout the process of data collection and analysis.

The data collected in a qualitative study includes more than words; attitudes, feelings, vocal and facial expressions, and other behaviors are also involved. The data which may consist of interview transcripts, field notes from observations, a wide variety of records and historical documents, and memoranda, are treated to rigorous ongoing analysis. Three processes are blended throughout the study: collection, coding, and analysis of data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967): This approach encourages the kind of flexibility so important to the qualitative researcher who can change a line of inquiry and move in new directions, as more information and a better understanding of what are relevant data are acquired (Blumer, 1999).

Many scholars have acknowledged that studies using qualitative methods are not only admissible and appropriate, but have added vitality as well as knowledge to the field of adult education. Apps (1999), Griffith (1999), Mezirow et al. (1975), and Rubenson (1999) are among these scholars. Indeed there appears to be a call for descriptive studies which continue to be important in adult education research (Long, et al., 2002). Cross (1981) acknowledged the importance of studies using "depth interviews" to the growing body of information about adult learners. Rubin (1996) stressed the need to know and describe the experience of flesh-and-blood women and men and, therefore, the need for "qualitative studies that capture the fullness of experience, the richness of living" (p. 14). She encouraged such qualitative studies as a means of testing assumptions and theories.

These important perspectives presented by qualitative researchers provided the foundation for my own research methodology.

Research Design and Procedures

Following these lines of thinking, a qualitative study of the social world of full-time adult undergraduates is proposed, using semi-structured interviews as the primary research approach. It is proposed to begin the interviewing process in the fall of 2010. They will begin with unstructured questions such as the following: "What has it been like to be a full-time student at Central College?" Often, with only an occasional question from me for clarification, it is

anticipated that the adults will talk about a wide variety of topics throughout an extended interview.

It is anticipated that up to 30 interviews and any necessary follow-up interviews will be conducted during that academic year. In addition, follow-up clarifying interviews will be conducted with at least a dozen of these students during the second academic year after I have completed some data analysis and obtained a beginning understanding of the findings.

All interviews will be tape-recorded and, based on four pilot interviews already conducted, are expected to vary in length from 45 minutes to one hour and 45 minutes. The interviews will be informal and open-ended, and carried out in a conversational style.

I will write field notes in conjunction with the interviews, follow-up interviews, observations, and casual encounters with subjects. Memoranda also will be written while listening to taped interviews, typing transcripts, and reflecting upon a particular interview. In addition to the interviews and follow-up interviews, I expect to obtain other data throughout the study, such as comments from administrative and teaching colleagues, papers or other materials subjects care to give to me, and ongoing literature review.

I anticipate that ongoing data analysis will take place throughout the study. All of the taped interviews, memoranda, and field notes will be entered into computer files. I will use *The Ethnographer*, a software program that uses a coding system organized around different topics and themes found in these files. A scheme of numbers and letters will be used to designate major categories and subcategories. "Hard copies" of all computer files of data also can be coded using colored pens to mark the margins with the appropriate numbers and letters if needed.

Connections between categories and themes will be used to further my understanding of the adult full-time student's world and to shape the organization of the data for portrayal in my final document.

Miscellaneous Materials

Although they are not included in this sample proposal, this section would include such areas as a bibliography of cited references in the APA 6th style, any statement deemed appropriate about the use and significance of the proposed study, a description of the intended writing style and process, any necessary appendix material, and a copy of any interview schedule.