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Janet Cosman-Ross

*Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, cosmac6a@erau.edu*

Diana Hiatt-Michael

*Pepperdine University*

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## **ADULT STUDENT MOTIVATORS AT A UNIVERSITY SATELLITE CAMPUS**

Janet Cosman-Ross, Ed. D.  
Center Faculty Chair  
*Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University*  
Inland Empire, CA

Diana Hiatt-Michael, Ed. D.  
Professor of Education  
*Pepperdine University*  
Malibu, CA

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## **Adult Student Motivators at a University Satellite Campus**

### *Purpose*

The purpose of this qualitative study was to determine what factors motivated the adult learners at a Southern California university complex. Using surveys and interviews, the study also provided insight into the expectations of the students in relation to their careers and personal growth. In addition, analysis of the data uncovered information on how employer reimbursement of education costs affected the students' motivation, who influenced the students to attend school, and why the students chose this university over others in the area.

### *Perspective*

One of the main factors that determine the success of a university is the interaction between students and instructors. That interaction consists of many dynamics, but motivation is one of the most important. The motivation of both students and instructors helps determine the amount of learning that takes place. A high level of student motivation has a positive impact on the learning process (Bruno, 2001).

The theoretical basis for this study is based upon two models. The first is Bandura's (1977) modeling principle, which states that people observe the behavior of others, and then choosing one's own course of action based on that observation. The second model is Herzberg's (1959) *Motivation-Hygiene Theory*, which asserts there are internal and external "satisfiers" that drive personal motivation. Herzberg's theory is, in part, based on Maslow's hierarchy of needs; both theorists imply that internal motivators such as sense of achievement and self-improvement play a large part in learning motivation and critical thinking.

The study is also based on the works of Knowles, Holton & Swanson (1998), Vroom (1995) and Wlodkowski (1999). Knowles et al. believe that although there can be relevant and important external motivators present (such as the possibility of higher earnings in the workplace), the internal motivators such as quality of life, satisfaction, and self-esteem are stronger. What motivates adults, Knowles et al. believe, is having access to learning that solves problems in their lives, and that helps them arrive at an explanation of the meaning of life and to improve upon it.

Vroom (1995) originated the Expectancy Theory in which motivation is most likely to occur when learning has value to the learner (valence), the effort to learn will be useful to the learner (instrumentality), and the learner's effort will be rewarded by the learner's expected outcome (expectancy).

According to Wlodkowski (1999), the relationship between adult learning and motivation has not been extensively researched because the connection seems obvious. However, he feels that culture and emotions have a great affect on intrinsic motivation. "Emotion is a valid and important topic for understanding the differences we find in learning among adults" (p. 8).

### *Methodology*

This university was chosen for study because all of the students were working adults and because the researcher had complete access to the entire student population. The population used in this study was all available students enrolled at the university's centers of the complex at the beginning of 2003. There were 131 students, both graduate and undergraduate, available for survey administration.

The motivators selected for the survey were based on the most common internal

and external drivers discovered during the literature review of motivation theories of adult learning. These were: recognition, sense of achievement, increased salary, joy of learning, new career, self-improvement, obtaining a degree, family opinion, meeting new people, usefulness of information, and job promotions. The survey and interview questions were reviewed prior to administration by a panel of experts that consisted of a center director from the university, two adjunct instructors teaching at the university, and a retired education specialist. A pilot survey was administered to five students not currently enrolled in classes.

The survey consisted of two methods for the students to rank their motivators from strongest to weakest. First was the use of cards in a comparative Q-sort technique for rank-ordering the learning motivators. Next the students rated the same motivators on a Likert scale. This added additional information regarding student perception of each motivator.

From the interview pool, 25 students were chosen to undergo a semi-structured interview lasting 15-30 minutes. The interview questions were open-ended, and their purpose was to gain a more in-depth understanding of the motivators of the students.

The survey results were tabulated, and the interview transcriptions were analyzed and coded by subject matter experts. The results of both processes provided a rich body of data on which to base conclusions about the adult learners' motivations.

### *Findings and Conclusions*

The study indicated that the students were motivated to learn mainly by self-improvement and sense of achievement. In the survey, 34 (27.0%) students ranked *self-improvement* as their number one motivator to learn. Twenty-six (20.6%) ranked *sense of*

*achievement* first. These intrinsic motivators were more important to the students than external motivators. This finding supports Knowles et al.'s (1998) assertion that students are motivated to learn when they experience internal, psychological needs. The survey showed the intermediate motivators to be obtaining a degree and increased earning power. The weakest motivators were job promotion, usefulness of information, a new career, joy of learning, recognition from others, family opinion, and meeting new people.

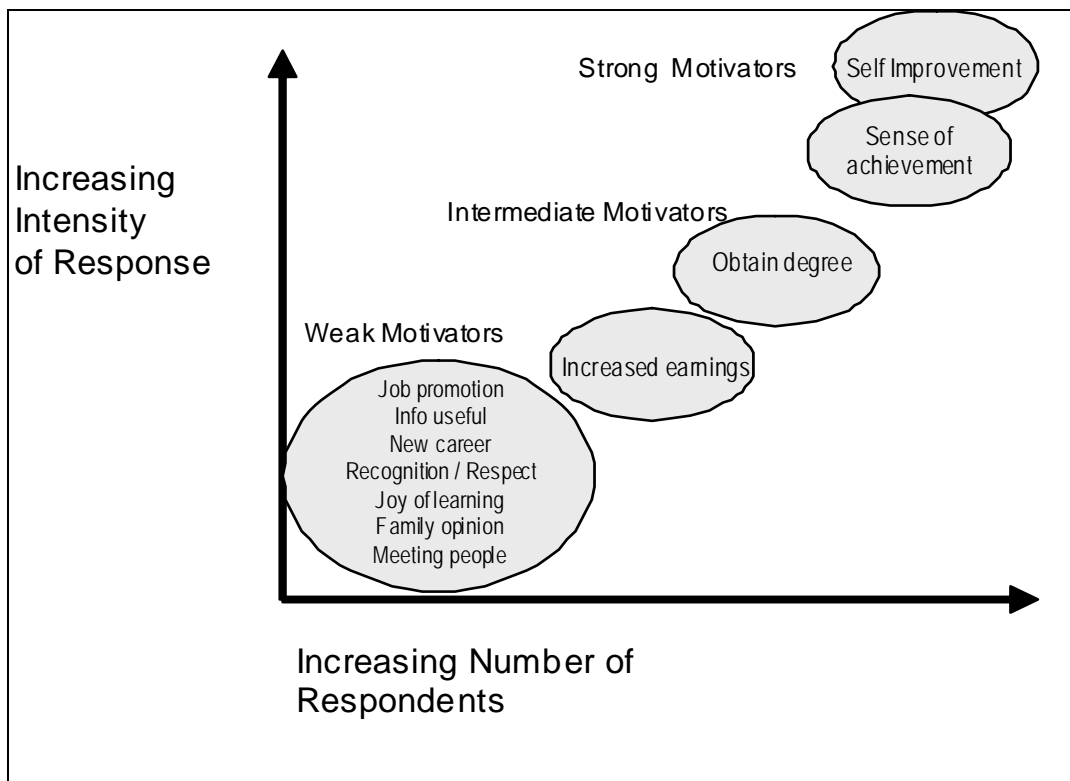


Figure: Model of adult learner motivation

There were three relationships discovered in the survey between the groups of students receiving full, partial, or no reimbursement from their employers. First, the students receiving 100% reimbursement by their employer were more likely to rank *self*

*improvement* as their primary motivator, but expressed the most dissatisfaction during interviews with external factors like university facilities and administration policies (Herzberg's 1959 hygiene factors). Second, students paying for part of their degree ranked the motivator *obtaining a degree* first more often than the other two groups. Their behavior is consistent with Cross' (1981) theory that expectation of a reward is an important motivator and Vroom's (1995) expectancy theory that people calculate how they would be rewarded (outcome) for their efforts. Third, students paying all their own costs rated *increased earning power* higher than *obtaining a degree*. This group also supported Cross' (1981) and Vroom's (1995) expectancy/reward theories.

The students appreciated instructors that used adult teaching methods and allowed the students some control of the learning environment. During the interviews, almost half of the students stated that they appreciated being treated like adults and believed that it was an important aspect of their learning experience. The interviewees also appreciated the real-world experience that the instructors brought to the classroom. This supports the view of Knowles et al. (1998) who believe adults are motivated by acquiring knowledge that solves real-world problems in their lives or gives them internal satisfaction

The interviewees had various expectations upon completing their degrees, but the most frequently cited was a feeling of achievement and/or fulfillment (11 occurrences or 44.0%). Since the main motivators for the students were self-improvement and sense of achievement, it is consistent that the main expectation was also intrinsic.

The reputation of the university was important to the adult students. This supports Nuhfer's (1999) assertion that "...students must be able to value their overall program and understand the unique potential it offers them as a profession or in enrichment of

their lives” (p. 81). During the interviews, over half of the students discussed the good reputation of the university as one of the main reasons they were attracted to it. Two-thirds of the interviewees stated that they were motivated by the fact that respected friends and acquaintances had attended the university. The influence of respected persons on student motivation clearly demonstrated Bandura’s (1977) theory of modeling as the students valued the opinions of those they respected.

The adult students were stressed by time constraints and appreciated any efforts that faculty/administration made to assist them in solving time-related problems. The adult learners in the study were primarily working adults who stated they could not focus on their learning as much as they would have preferred. The time needed for work and family weakened their motivation, distracted them, and hampered their efforts to learn. This is supported by Merriam & Caffarella (1999) who believe that lack of time is one of the two most often cited barriers to participation in adult education (the other is lack of money).

### *Educational Implications*

In order to effectively teach and serve the needs of adult learners at American universities it is important to understand their motivation to learn. Administrators and instructors must identify, nurture and capitalize upon student motivation to attract and retain students. The administration at the studied university should base all faculty, policy, and curriculum development upon the fact that the adult learners are motivated primarily by self-improvement and sense of achievement. Faculty development usually includes individual consultations, workshops, seminars, and conferences; however, the most effective institutional opportunities to develop instructors occur through frequent



interaction among faculty on teaching-related issues (Feldman & Paulsen, 1999). By encouraging frequent faculty collaboration on issues of student self-improvement and sense of achievement, the administration supports and recognizes the importance of these motivators in attracting and retaining students at the university.

Policies (including hiring) should reflect shared attitudes and values that foster the intrinsic motivation of the students, as should curriculum development. An effective university curriculum for adult learners incorporates the concept of self-directed learning associated with sense of achievement. This could be accomplished with input from the students and alumni, as well as from the instructors.

Mezirow (2000) states that instructors should regard and respect adult students as self-directed. The school should ensure that faculty have training in teaching adult learners. The students involved in this study emphasized that they want to be treated as adults, not children. Many instructors, while proficient in the subject they teach, have little training in teaching adults in the university setting. It is beneficial for the instructors to understand the difference between pedagogy (instructor-oriented teaching) and andragogy (student-oriented learning). Otherwise, the instructors may alienate and anger the students by treating them like children. This could harm the reputation of the school and cause enrollments to drop. Required training in teaching adult students, possibly online or in a group setting, would help the instructors deal with their own perceptions and with student interaction.

The worldwide reputation of the university under study is excellent, and this is important to the students attending it. The administration can ensure that the reputation remains well-respected by using instructors trained in adult learning and maintaining a

sound student-administration partnership process consisting of feedback and communication.

To continue upholding its reputation, the school should continue to hire instructors that have expertise in the field they are teaching. During the interviews, the students emphasized that having an instructor working within the industry was important to them. The students reported that current information and real-world examples brought into the classroom helped tie business theory to practice. At present, the university ensures that the adjunct instructors are highly qualified to teach in their respective areas and should continue to do so. In addition, the current ongoing instructor certification program of adjunct instructors should be maintained. All standards for the maintenance of accreditation should continue to be met and the university should maintain its partnerships with the all accrediting authorities.

The university should make all efforts (within reason) to accommodate the students' time limitations and problems by soliciting continuous feedback. The university provides course evaluation forms for the students to complete at the end of each class. Evaluations play an important role in providing feedback to the instructors and the administration. However, students should have the means to provide any type of feedback at any time during the semester. This information could then be reviewed by the faculty and the administration to make the university experience more time efficient.

The university should keep records that show which students are reimbursed by their employers and which are not. This data may be useful in helping the administration and faculty solve possible motivation problems that arise with students. For example, counseling a student who is being reimbursed may be different than that for a non-

reimbursed student. This information would also provide an additional dimension to a holistic model of adult student motivation.

The university should have an employment office at the center where students and business connect. Student resumes could be matched to employment opportunities, and businesses could file openings at the center. A full time administrator should be assigned to the position of employment coordinator; preferably working a later shift so that students could visit before class and during breaks.

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