Adult Students’ Learning Experiences and their Expectations of the Student Affairs Programs in American Community Colleges

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Abstract
The population of adult students in American community colleges is growing, yet researches in the field of student affairs seldom related to adult students. This qualitative research approached the perspectives of adult learners of community colleges in order to understand their learning experiences and expectations of the student affairs programs on campus. Bronfenbrenner’s Human Ecology Model was applied as the inquiry framework. This study concluded that a) adult community college students were more motivated and goal-oriented; family members, teachers, and tutoring services were the immediate settings adult students turned to when facing learning difficulties; b) the accessibility of student affair programs did not meet adult students’ expectations; c) cultural influences upon the perception of age and familiarity of student affairs shaped their learning experiences and engagement with student affairs programs; and d) senior decision-makers of the student affairs programs should play the role as the activator to take action on the full-range program reform to meet the needs of adult students. Several applications were provided for practice consideration.

Keywords: keywords: changes initiative, statewide, teacher preparation, families, disabilities

INTRODUCTION
Student affair programs of four-year colleges and universities unite various activities and services to promote student learning and campus connection. However, the lack of residence halls in most of the American community colleges deprives students’ traditional connection with the institutions. With the different nature of the institution itself and the diversity of student demographics, administrators of student affairs programs at American community colleges are facing greater challenges in providing multidimensional programs and engaging students in college experience (Williams, 2002) for facilitating their students heading to success.

According to Ender, Chand and Thornton (1996), learning success refers to goal completion in the American community college context. Since there are mainly nontraditional students, their goals will be widely differentiated. Therefore, student affairs programs must re-organize their resources to respond to students’ diverse needs in maximizing their learning and success. Under this consideration, knowing how student affairs programs affect student learning and success becomes a critical issue for practitioners. Particularly, students will benefit the most when they know what services and programs are available for and how to connect them with their learning and goals.

The population of adult learners in postsecondary settings is growing, and adult learning theories have been well developed and discussed (Haggis, 2009; Kasworm, 2012; Kenner & Weinerman, 2011; Kucukaydin & Cranton, 2012). However, researches in the field of student affairs seldom relate to adult students (Williams, 2002). The objective of this research is to approach the perspectives of adult learners of community colleges in order to understand their learning experiences and expectations of the student affairs programs provided by their attending institutions.

Two questions guiding this research are:
1. What are adult students’ learning experiences at American community colleges and how do they deal with learning barriers?
2. What are adult students’ expectations of the student affairs programs at community colleges, and which parts of the programs can be improved to enhance their learning?

LITERATURE REVIEW
Demographics of Community College Students in America
With open-door admissions and lower tuition than that of traditional four-year institutions, community colleges in the United States have become “centers of educational opportunity open to all seekers” (American Association of Community Colleges [AACC], n.d.). Many researches and reports have shown that the numbers of community colleges and enrollments have been growing rapidly. According to 2013 Community College Fact Sheet (AACC, 2013), there are 1,132 community colleges around America and the enrollment headcount is 13 millions. Other
student demographics include: 57% of the students are female, over 40% are non-Caucasian minorities, 59% among them attend part-time, and the average age of community college students is 28. Apparently, the student bodies of community colleges show tremendous diversity and complexity (AACC, 2013; Andrews & Cavan, 2001; Dungy, 1999; Ender, Chand, et al., 1996; Schuetz, 2008). Students with diverse expectations, learning needs, experiences, skills, work and employment, obligations and privileges (Levin, 2008) have brought multidimensional perspectives to the campuses.

Roueche and Roueche (1998) claim that the adjustments of campuses have not caught up the demographic changes, and student services are among the frontline units to respond to the new trend. Many reports available recommend student services practitioners speed up the accommodation to meet diverse needs of students (e.g. Compton, Cox, & Laanan, 2006; Watson, 2012; William, 2002), but few successful practices of student services at American community colleges are solicited in literature. Future studies on how to effectively and efficiently provide student services for community college students are necessary.

The Complex Nature of Student Affairs Programs In American Community Colleges

Cohen and Brawer (1996) classify community college students and their reasons for attending from psychological, sociological, economic and political perspectives (pp. 55-56). Their findings not only echo the issues of demographical changes that have been discussed previously but also reveal the complexity of student affairs programs. Student affairs programs include “elements both regulatory and developmental” (Cohen & Brawer, 1996, p. 191) to regulate institutional order and support student development and needs. The authors mention seven various responsibilities of student services (admissions, orientation, academic assessment, counseling and advising, follow-up on academic progress, research and evaluation, and coordination and training of staff), and list several considerations (recruitment and retention, counseling and guidance, orientation, extracurricular activities and financial aid) (Cohen & Brawer, 1996, pp. 192-205).

The diversity of student needs and goals in higher education is perceived by many researchers as an influential factor that affects student affairs programs (Ender, Chand, et al., 1996; Ender, Newton & Capel, 1996). With the goal of maximizing student development, student affairs programs are to facilitate and support students’ goal attainments, which is viewed as learning success in the community college context (Ender, Chand, et al., 1996). However, success means something different to every community college student due to their diverse learning needs and expectations, the student services of community colleges should be multidimensional. Not only Ender and associates but also many other researchers (Dungy, 1999; Garland, 1986; Schuetz, 2008) emphasize student success as the top priority for the institutions and student affairs programs.

Student affairs programs at community colleges are filled with multiple features because of students’ diversity and various institutional missions. Yet, not much research has focused on such aspects. The lack of literature on student affairs programs in the American community college setting leaves many questions unanswered and this research attempts to fill the literature gap.

Recommendations for the Student Affairs Programs

Collaboration and innovation of technology and social media are the ideas most often recommended for the improvement of student affairs programs for practitioners. Student affairs programs must reorganize and re-allocate their resources to improve student learning and success and to respond to student needs (Ender, Chand, et al. 1996; Kuh, 1996; Watson, 2012). In community college contexts, student affairs programs cannot be separated from their academic counterparts anymore (Ender, Chand, et al. 1996; Garland, 1986). Student affairs practitioners “are increasing the involvement of students in the academic experience, engaging in preventive law, integrating new student groups, participating in the recruitment and retention of students, and helping to develop supportive alumni” (Garland, 1986). In other words, student affairs professionals take a new role as “integrators” (Garland, 1986) involving in integrating student and institutional developments, and organizing resources and college functions (Ender, Chand, et al., 1996) in order to maximize student success and learning. Full range and flexible schedule of services programs can improve the connection of the students and the institutions (Watson, 2012).

A body of literature suggests that technology provides the flexibility and accessibility that community colleges are seeking to respond to demographic changes (Andrews & Cavan, 2001; Ender, Chand, et al., 1996; Gilbert, 1995; Hancock, 2001). Those works show student affairs professionals and students have started making increased use of information technology since we entered the Internet era, and programming applications have been created to maximize service transactions via communication systems. Interaction with faculty and administrators are expanded as well. However, the literature provides little information of the extent to which technology has been implemented.
in student affairs programs, especially in the community college setting.

The emerging role demands a wider range of skills for student affairs officers: general management and planning, resource and information management, public relations and policies, research and evaluation (Garland, 1986) and technology proficiency (Bowman & Cuyjet, 1999; Ender, Chand, et al., 1996). A survey also indicates leadership, student contact, communication, personnel, and fiscal management as the most important skills that mid-level student affairs administrators should possess (Fey & Carpenter, 1996). However, these are general findings that are not explicitly specified for certain types of higher education institutions. The demand for research on the topic of student affairs programs and practices in the community college settings is relatively high, and the lack of literature leaves many considerations unanswered.

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative Approach

A qualitative methodology was employed for this study. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2000), qualitative research focuses on “study[ing] things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (p. 3). Since this study was primarily concerned with the adult community college students’ learning experiences and their connections with student affairs programs and services, the qualitative methodology was appropriate.

Conceptual Framework

Urie Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Model of Human Development (1979) was utilized as the conceptual framework to understand adult learners’ experiences with student services programs in U.S. community college settings. Bronfenbrenner’s model discusses the relationships of person-environment interactions and the influences of such interactions over time within the context of an individual’s life and surrounding environments and society. The model contains microsystems, mesosystems, exosystems, and macrosystems, which are all interrelated as a dynamic and interdependent structure within social contexts.

The ecological environment is acknowledged “as a set of nested structures, each inside the next” (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The innermost circle contains both the immediate settings and the developing person (microsystem); the next level is beyond the boundaries of each microsystem and focuses on the interactions and interconnections among them (mesosystem); the next step embraces the events that take place in settings where the individual is absent (exosystem); and the last situation contains all three levels of the environment and is dominated by cultures and/or subcultures (macrosystem). The ecology of human development not only involves an active human being and the changeable immediate settings that the growing individual inhabits, but also takes the interconnections between these settings and other external influences from the larger environments into account (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Bronfenbrenner’s ecology model is applicable for this research on knowing how student affairs programs should be utilized to meet adult students’ needs because of several reasons. The ecology model notes the different context-specific person-environment interactions individuals have, which can be applied to access individual learning experiences and needs. Besides, the educational institutions are common places where many students attend; not only is it critical to understand how students relate themselves to the common institutions but also to examine the relationships vice versa. Lastly, the model acknowledges the interdependence that the multiple layers of interactions one may have throughout the life course; this perspective is beneficial when reconstructing student affairs programs with the knowledge that adults bring different life experiences to the colleges.

Sample Selection

Three community college students who were over twenty-two years old were recruited. They were all from the same American community college. In order to recruit a diverse sample group to represent the multicultural demographics of current community colleges, the participants were selected based on their demographic backgrounds and academic concentrations.

Research Method and Data Analysis

Individual interviews were applied as the research method. Each interview was about one-hour in length with the same open-ended and semi-structured interview protocol, and the conversation was audio-recorded with the interviewees’ permission. The full interviews were transcribed for the sake of data analysis and cross-comparisons. Each participant chose a pseudonym for use in this study.

STORIES OF THEM

John, an International Student

John was a junior-college-graduated international student from East Asia, and had only been in America for about one year. After working in a sewer-machine manufacturing factory for years, he came to the United State at the age of 27 for learning English in order to prepare himself for a career change. “My parents hope that I can also get a university degree here. I am not sure if that’s really what I want, but my parents and brother support me financially and encourage me to do so,” he said, “I
have to take a TOEFL exam because of the application requirement, and it’s very tough.” He would finish his language program from the community college soon, and the awaiting uncertainty seemed to bother him.

**Mary, a Returning Adult Student**

Mary, a mother of three and a grandmother of seven, the forty-eight-year-old American has been working on her mechanical engineering degree for the last three years. This was the third time that she decided to finish her degree at this community college. She was forced to quit the school twice because of family obligations. “I have two more semesters to go,” she said with a smile on her face, “and I will transfer to a four-year university.” She had been doing pretty well the past three years, and finally found what she really liked as her major. Mary continued, “when I was off the second time, I had enough time and space to think about what I really want. Now I have enough self-knowledge, and I know what my skills, interests and abilities are. I really like mechanical engineering, and I am very focused on what I am doing now.”

As a mom, a wife, a full-time student and a part-time employee, she needed to manage her time well. “My husband is very supportive… The schoolwork is very demanding, so I need to take full advantage of the instructors and the academic services in order to succeed in class,” Mary said. She joined study groups and tutoring programs, and spent most of her time studying at school during the weekdays. “I have no socialization at all… It’s not easy for me to fit in a culture that is full of young people; I can only talk to my old friends on the phone on weekends,” she sadly said.

**Tina, an Immigrant Student**

Twenty-four-year-old Tina had immigrated to the United States from Vietnam almost a decade ago. She was a returning student and was taking some classes in order to get into the nursing program at the community college. “I left once since I needed to work full-time,” Tina said. After one year, she felt that education was really important, so she decided to restart. Tina explained, “The nursing program at this community college is high profile, I can make money after graduation. But I am so afraid of blood. Getting a degree here is also my family expectation as well.”

“I never hang out with my classmates.” Tina described her socialization with peers, “I choose not to. I am very quiet, so I never say something extra unless I have to. I am afraid of saying something wrong. I feel very comfortable about who I am.” She had tried to fit in the American culture, but it didn’t work out. She thought language barriers affected her communication with others, sometimes, and she mainly socialized with those folks from her country.

**DISCUSSION**

**Learning Experiences: Interactions Among Micro- and Meso- Systems**

John, Mary and Tina all mentioned that the various agencies surrounding them, such as families, work and colleague, friends, school, studies and classmates, teachers and so on, played important roles in their student lives. The interplays among those agencies, additionally, were influential in forming their learning experiences as well. In Bronfenbrenner’s language, those interactions were shaped in the contexts of micro- and meso-systems.

Bronfenbrenner (1979) defined a *microsystem* as “a pattern of activities, roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person in a given setting with particular physical and material characters” (p. 22), and the place where individuals could “readily engage in face-to-face interaction” (p.22). Microsystem is the “immediate setting” (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 7) that people have direct involvements in.

However, the interconnections are not just formed by the interactions between individuals and each separate setting; the interactions between settings create another kind of interconnection, the *mesosystem*. A mesosystem contains “the interrelations among two or more settings in which the developing person actively participates” (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 25), and it is like an extended network that consists of a system of multiple microsystems. The mesosystem of the ecology model is a powerful vehicle for exploring adult community college students’ learning experiences because it conceptualizes which microsystems students choose and how those chosen contexts and agencies interplay in their lives.

**Interactions with Microsystems are Personalized When Encountering Learning Difficulties**

Adult learners’ motivations to learn differ from one to another based on individual backgrounds, prior learning experiences, aptitudes and attitudes, so do their barriers and resistance to learning (Cross, 1981). Even if adult students have some of the microsystems in common, the roles of them may be different when encountering learning obstacles. Take John’s case as an example.

“In the beginning, I feel embarrassed for studying English, because I can not say any English... Last May, I almost give up my dream... but my parents support and encourage me...I even cry to my mother... I never tell anybody... I get homesick... this is a foreign country and it’s very cold in winter... I talk my mother about my frustration, don’t want to bother other friends here... I am an adult and I have to be responsible for myself... I thank for my
teacher, she encourages me very often... I will not talk about this with my classmates and my friends... I haven’t tried counseling services, but I know some of my classmates will go there...”

Although his parents were in his home-country where geographically was not his immediate setting, it was categorized as one of his microsystems for the frequent interaction with them on the phone. Yet, Mary dealt with her learning frustrations in the way different from John’s. She described her extensive utilization of campus learning resources.

“It has been very challenging... I look for help from the tutoring services and joining in study groups and they help a lot... I also take full advantage from the instructors...”

Tina’s story showed that she did not search assistance from any form of microsystems when encountering learning challenges; her response in this scenario is as below:

“I will drop the class and run away if I cannot understand what the teacher is talking about... it happened once... If not because of money (once I receive a degree), I don’t want to study...”

John and Mary showcased stronger motivations to their learning than Tina did, resulting in their active search for support from their immediate settings to overcome learning obstacles. To John, families and instructors were his microsystems regardless of geographic distances, and those of Mary’s were teachers, tutors and learning groups; different adult learners choose different agencies to interact with when they are in need of support and assistance in their learning process.

Mesosystems Are Sometimes Settings of Conflicts in Regard to Learning

Mesosystems refer to those situations or events in which at least two microsystems come together in some respect. Based on the interviewees’ responses, the interconnections among different microsystems were not always positive. Tina expressed her struggle of staying focused on her study as her boyfriend lived far from her:

“I cannot study at all! I have some relationship problems. I have a long-distance relationship with my boyfriend, and I sometimes miss him very much so that I cannot focus on my study...we will get engaged this month, so hopefully things will be better....”

Mary also shared her own experience:

“It was bad... it was family tragedy that forced me to quit school for a few years...”

Tina’s and Mary’s experiences indicated that when one form of microsystems (boyfriend and family) collided with another (schooling), the newly-linked mesosystems (boyfriend-schooling and family-schooling) might be turbulent in nature which caused negative effects on their learning. The ecological model hints that the more links there are between microsystems, the better it is for the development of individuals (Howard & Johnson, 2000); yet this study shows that microsystems are not always complementary, and adult students are more likely to discontinue or neglect their schooling and learning when they feel they are placed in a situation where family obligations and relationships are viewed as the priority.

Rare Interactions with Classmates and Campus Activities

The third sub-theme learned from the participants’ learning experiences is that these three participants were all relatively isolated from their classmates and campus activities to certain degree.

“I sometimes hang out with my classmates after class, especially they have something special. I will go to visit their apartments... or go to drinking coffee ... I am the oldest in my class....” [John]

“I don’t socialize at all... I am too busy in my study... I am not comfortable with this... I am more like a mom among my fellow classmates...” [Mary]

“I choose not to have friendship with them... I don’t know what to talk about...” [Tina]

It doesn’t mean that adult students do not need friendship, instead, they need it as much as traditional-aged students. Age differences, multiple responsibilities, and a lack of common topics hinder adult students’ social lives on-campus. John was the only one among the three positively stated his interactions with his classmates, but the connections were not strong enough to greatly enrich his learning experiences at the community college; on the contrary, the two female students consciously excluded fellow classmates from their microsystems.

Organized group activities, such as Greek life and college sports, are important parts of college lives to many traditional-aged students. Yet, none of the participants mentioned his/her engagement in such campus activities, which could be termed as a form of mesosystems. It was hard to tell if the consequence was resulted from their lack of friendship and socialization on campus or there might be other reasons, but this phenomenon limited opportunities for adult community college students to experience activities outside of classrooms.
Learning experiences are in the center of students’ study and are critical to learning success. The factors that affect adult community college students’ learning experiences are various and personalized; some may be supportive, while some may result in dropout and departure. This research echoes that microsystems and mesosystems both directly affect students because they are settings in which the individual engages and is socialized, but the roles of fellow classmates and campus activities contribute little to adult community college students’ learning experiences.

Age Matters: Influences from the Macrosystem upon their Learning

The macrosystem, an overarching system, is culturally constructed, and other layers of the interconnections are all embedded under this umbrella. Bronfenbrenner referred to macrosystems as “consistencies, in the form and content of lower-order systems (micro-, meso-, and exo-) that exist, or could exist, at the level of the subculture or the culture as a whole, along with any belief systems or ideology underlying such consistencies” (1979, p.26). This system is the broadest environmental force that influences all the interactions, particularly at a specific moment within a specific culture.

An immigrant student’s home-country cultures and ideologies, for example, would be the key factors that affect her interactions with others when she lives in a foreign country. Tina was asked if she was satisfied with the student services, and her comments provided great cultural-bound insights:

“I was from a very poor country... everything here is very satisfying... so I appreciate what I have now in the United States... I don’t have any negative thinking about America...I feel good...”

Tina drew prior experiences from her home country, and showed her appreciation. Her sincerity also reflected the Asian culture of behaving in a gratifying and humble manner.

The ideological meaning of age is also very cultural bounded. All participants expressed concern about being the oldest in the class or being too old to be a student. John indicated that people were supposed to have families in their twenties in his culture, so he was anxious to get his studies done in order to enter workforce and to start a family. Mary called herself “more like a mom among fellow classmates.” The age issue apparently bothered them, not only in their identities as students but also in school lives – having trouble fitting in the college culture.

Different cultures interpret “age” differently, and the interpretations also influence their ways of dealing with personal difficulties; in other words, the macrosystem can serve as a lens through which an individual interprets or makes sense of personal experiences. John tried to resolve learning challenges on his own, since he was an independent grown-up that must act tough; differently, Mary had overcome the embarrassment of being the oldest student in her classes, and she was not shy of taking advantage of tutoring services and faculty to help her survive the demanding coursework.

Involvements in the Student Affairs Programs: Exosystem as The Activator Or Change Agent

Exosystems refer to relations between a microsystem and a system in which a person is not directly involved; it is the structure between the mesosystem and macrosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The exosystems exist when the individuals may never enter the settings while events occur in which directly or indirectly affect the situations in people’s immediate environments; for instance, the availability of federal financial aid may influence a prospective student’s decision of attending community college, although s/he is not a part of the financial aid policy-makers. The above relationship is similar as the adult students to student service policies: most of the students cannot be part of the decision-making process (the setting that the individual does not actively participate in), but the students as a whole will be influenced by the decisions of/and changes that have been made (the same setting that has a profound effect on the individual’s development).

Each interviewee was asked to name some of the campus student affairs programs and to comment on their satisfactions with them. It was found that the more services one could name, the more comments one could think of to point out what should be reorganized to meet adult students’ needs for the enhancement of learning. Mary was knowledgeable with student services on campus but she complained that there were no special support groups or workshops for older students; she suggested counseling and advising programs should address older students’ issues more, and office hours needed to be flexible enough to accommodate adult students’ schedules. Her comments were in great congruence with the observations Roueche and Roueche (1998) made regarding campus policies had not caught up student demographic changes and expectations.

So, what can the institution do to shrink the gaps between students’ expectations and the student affairs policy, such as those that Mary had commented on? Repositioning student affairs programs as exosystems to make some changes could be the answer. The dynamic interactions among the various agencies shows the flexibility of the nature of the human ecological model, therefore, there should be some possibilities that at least one of the systems are able to serve as the activator to generate accommodations.
to adapt the contextual changes. In other words, the key player to answer students’ complaints of student services and to take actions to provide better services is the policy-makers of the student affairs programs. Senior leaders of the student affairs programs at community colleges ought to serve as the change agent to work with other campus resource providers to develop a more adult-student-friendly learning environment and support network in order to nurture reciprocal interactions between older students and the community colleges.

John and Tina, both were not born and raised in the U.S. and only had limited learning experiences on American campus, were relatively silent in responding to their expectations of student services programs. Their lack of comments might represent another cultural difference rooted in their macrosystems, since the concept of student services and affairs was less prevalent in their home countries. As a result, they rarely sought after student services for assistance and support when they felt stressed in their learning, indicating the beliefs embedded in macrosystems would influence the choices and availability of microsystmes. To student affairs professionals of exosystems, they must equip with a better and subtle understanding of cultural differences and adult learning for taking proficient actions to make changes to or activate new initiatives for student affair policies.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY
The validity and reliability of this study might be affected due to the small number of research participants, since only three adult community college students were interviewed. The findings from this study might not be generalizable and with low representativeness; future researchers on this topic are encouraged to recruit more participants. Another consideration in relation to the nature of the sample was the diverse backgrounds of the participants: all participants in this research were of different ethnicity; therefore, high variances were expected and the findings might not be the mainstream. Last but not the least, Bronfenbrenner’s model showed the various kinds of interactions across and/or among the four levels, micro-, meso-, exo- and macro- systems, but the model failed to identify the magnitudes of interactions and the nature of the influences; learning how to access the magnitudes of interactions and the nature of the influences would be critical when applying the Human Development model in the future.

CONCLUSION AND APPLICATION
The population of adult students in American community colleges is growing, and adult learning theories have been well developed and discussed. Through the lens of three adult students, this research approached the perspectives of adult community college students to understand their learning experiences and expectations of the student affairs programs on campus.

Based on the findings of the study, the paper concludes that the general learning experiences for adult community college students are in great congruence with the adult learning theories, that adult are more motivated, goal-oriented, and usually have difficult prior experiences (Cross, 1981; Merriam & Brockett, 2007) towards learning than their younger counterparts. In addition, the greater an adult’s learning motivation is, the more likely s/he is to persist or overcome learning difficulties. By applying Bronfenbrenner’s Human Ecology Model (1979) as the framework of this study, family members, teachers, and tutoring services were identified as the immediate settings where adult community college students turned to when facing learning difficulties and challenges, yet neither classmates nor student affair programs were noted as forms of micro-system support. The finding also revealed that if adult learners encounter conflicts between different micro-systems, they tend to put learning in danger which often leads to dropout. The findings show the complexity of the interconnections among individuals’ immediate settings, and how those interactions facilitate and influence adult community college students’ learning experiences.

Regardless of their historical presence on American community college campuses, student affair programs are not perceived conveniently accessible to adult students. Participants of the study complained that student affairs programs in community colleges could not accommodate their needs due to scheduling conflicts and lack of activities appealing to adult students. Additionally, student affairs programs might not be the institutional function that was well known for students coming from backgrounds in which such services were prevalent; without proper introduction, these students would not be aware of what student affairs program could offer and how to make good use of them when they were in need. The findings of this study further conclude that the senior decision-makers of the student affairs programs should play the role as the activator to take action on the full-range program reform at community colleges in order to meet the needs of adult students and fulfill their expectations of the student affairs services.

How adult students shape their learning experiences is affected by the macro cultural influences that each individual grows up with. In this study, all participants were conscious of their ages because most of their peers were a lot of younger; being the oldest in the class or feeling too old for learning somewhat shied them away from group or campus activities. Besides the lack of common topics, the
cultural perception of “learning is only for the young” seems to discourage adult students to build close friendship with their younger counterparts. Another cultural influence noteworthy for this study is the knowledge of student affairs. Two of the participants grew up in Asian countries where functions of student affairs were not as palpable, therefore, they knew little of the student support resources on campus and had no expectations for the student affairs programs. The effect of macro cultural influences is so powerful that the influences may last over time.

Based on the findings of the present study, some applications are suggested to be used to foster adult students’ learning experiences in the American community college. First, senior student affairs administrators need to take the role as an activator to implement reforms of full-range services for the diverse demographics of students at community colleges. This is an important step to close up the distance between adult students and the community college campus. Second, student affairs administrators need to come up with more adult-friendly activities that will not only increase adult students’ participation but also decrease agism, a form of discrimination based on perception of age. Additionally, the administrators are suggested to make extra efforts to better promote the availability of student services to students who are less familiar with such an institutional function. Last but not the least, community college faculty members can play an important role to assist their adult students to succeed. Adult students are more willing to turn to course instructors, instead of classmates, when they face learning difficulties; as a result, course instructors may be one of the most influential figures to provide them with guidance, especially for those who are about to drop out. Community colleges are suggested to encourage their instructors to be more conscientious with their students’ performance.

REFERENCES


