



Resources for Online Learners

Challenges and Opportunities for Returning Students

Barriers to Returning Students

In her studies of college enrollment and participation, K. Patricia Cross (1981) found that the following types of barriers often interfere with the successful completion of higher education programs such as the one you're beginning now.



Institutional Barriers. Educational procedures and practices that discourage adult learners. These include admission and transfer or credit policies, class scheduling, and access to necessary services such as library or counseling services. Western University recognizes that every student is unique in terms of background and lifestyle, and is committed to minimizing institutional barriers through individual arrangements with distance learners.

Situational Barriers. Obstacles arising out of one's situation in life at a given time. For example, children needing care or supervision, transportation to classes or learning facilities, financial constraints, etc.

Distance learning programs such as those offered at Western University are designed to minimize the barriers of time and space. Assistance is available, whether it be financial or logistical, through the program office and individual faculty.

Dispositional and Personal Barriers. Personal concerns frequently pose greater obstacles to returning to school than either institutional or situational barriers. Almost all adult learners struggle at some point with one or more of the following types of concerns:

- *Time.* Finding time for education in a day full of activity is the most commonly reported obstacle. Distance learners in particular develop the self-discipline and skill to juggle the various demands, responsibilities, commitments, distractions, and preoccupations that make up their life in order that time can be set aside for educational pursuits.

Exercises have been provided in this course to help you overcome this barrier. In these exercises, you will have the opportunity to identify your time constraints and develop some useful time management skills.

- *Lack of Confidence.* Apprehension about the unknown is understandable as adults begin a new educational experience. New students commonly experience academic insecurity and question whether "they can do it."

For distance learners, this insecurity may be compounded by a lack of familiarity with the technologies of distance education, the skills of self-directed learning, and the absence of face-to-face contact with faculty and other students.

Awareness of this obstacle is the first step in dealing with it. Begin preparing yourself now for the demands that lie ahead by exploring your confidence level and acknowledging your insecurities. Use this course as a starting point to acquire the knowledge and skills you will need to succeed. Start developing your

support system now by establishing a regular dialogue with your instructor and contacting other students in your area.

Keep in mind the strengths you bring to your academic experience. If you're like most adult learners, you are highly motivated and have a wealth of background experience gained from work and other life events. Also, you have already proven yourself to be a successful learner in a variety of settings.

- *Family Reactions.* Initial support for a decision to enroll in a new course or program may dwindle when the reality of the commitment becomes apparent. Resentment in the form of statements such as, "How come you always have to study?" or "We don't play anymore." can produce feelings of guilt as the adult learner finds less time to meet the needs of family and/or friends.

Share your concerns with family members from the outset and get their support. Seek their help in problem-solving schedule conflicts as they arise. Invite them to share in your accomplishments as you progress toward your goal.

The Returning to School Syndrome

If you're returning to school after a long absence, you may experience conflicts as you try to balance your personal and professional roles. Dr. Donea Shane (1980) described this normal response to re-entry into formal education as the "returning-to-school syndrome."

While the effects are more pronounced on resident students, a distance learner enrolling in a new educational program may experience some symptoms of the returning-to-school syndrome, or RTSS. According to Dr. Shane, this form of "culture shock" is characterized by feelings ranging from mild anxiety to panic and crisis. The syndrome typically progresses through the following phases:

- *Phase 1: Honeymoon.* During this period, the returning student feels good about himself/herself, having finally taken the necessary steps toward meeting personal and/or professional goals. The student is attuned to the similarities between his/her previous education and the current experience, and these similarities tend to reinforce the student's professional identity. The student is unaware of any conflict or stress; instead, euphoria and excitement are the prevailing feelings.
- *Phase 2: Conflict.* Sometime during completion of the student's first course, these positive feelings are replaced by turbulent negative emotions. While the intensity of the conflict varies, the source is usually the same: the growing realization that the student's own conceptual foundations and methods are inappropriate and do not bring the desired results. Instead of concentrating on the similarities, the student now focuses on the differences between the past and present. Feelings of frustration and inadequacy prevail. If not checked, this disintegration process can be damaging personally, professionally, and academically. The student can become depressed. As reintegration begins, the student may react with a strong rejection of the "new culture," i.e., the academic program itself. This hostility may become chronic, or it may be repressed, resulting in false acceptance of the situation.
- *Phase 3: Biculturalism.* The most positive resolution of the conflict that characterizes Phase Two is the achievement of biculturalism, the ability to be as comfortable and effective in one culture (work) as the other (school). In this phase, threats to the student's ego have been dealt with, and the student feels prepared to cope with any situation that may arise. A sense of humor often returns, and tension and anxiety decline. While the student's perspective of the profession is permanently altered, he or she appreciates his or her own growth and is able to integrate elements from both the past and the present.

So if you are just beginning a new academic program and find yourself experiencing any of the RTSS symptoms, don't worry. The symptoms are perfectly normal and will pass if you follow a few simple precautions:

- *Become more aware of your emotional states, particularly your response to the program.*
- *Acknowledge any conflicts you experience. Don't try to hide them. If you can, identify a family member, colleague, another student, or an instructor you can talk to about your concerns.*
- *DON'T GIVE UP! Review your goals and renew your commitment on a regular basis. Celebrate your accomplishments--big or small--as you continue with the program.*

Additional Resources

Bruno, F. J. (2001). *Going back to school (2nd ed)*. Arco Publishing.

Siebert, A. & Gilpin, B. (2000). *Survival and Success : The Adult Student's Guide (4th ed)*
Portland, OR: Practical Psychology Press.

Schindley, W. (2002). *Adults in College: A survival guide for nontraditional students*. Dallas Publishing