

## **SUPPORTING OUR ADULT LEARNERS**

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### Introduction

This project was conceived in Spring 2018 as a means of developing a comprehensive strategy to enroll, retain, and graduate adult learners at Middle Georgia State University (MGA). For the academic year 2018-2019, most of the work initially focused on the Dublin Campus. Since MGA's consolidation in 2013, this campus has averaged 350-400 students per fall and spring semester. About 1/3 of these are adult learners. Most students live in the Dublin / Laurens County area, as do most of the faculty and staff based at the campus. It is a commuter campus, with one active student organization. Due to the limited number of faculty and the fact that most administrative / staff functions at the campus are handled by "an office of one" with some considerable overlap, Dublin faculty and staff have frequent opportunities to interact with a large percentage of students throughout the year. The student population consists of mostly freshmen and sophomores, largely because four-year degrees cannot be attained solely at the Dublin campus.

Since Fall 2013, I have been based at the Dublin Campus as a full-time lecturer of history and political science. My husband, Dr. Stephen Svonavec, has worked in Dublin since 2005, first as a full-time faculty member, then as Campus Director, and currently as Director of Academic Initiatives. He and my other Dublin colleagues have provided a wealth of helpful information about our adult learners and our students in general. Ms. Tori Pitts, Recruiter for Dual Enrollment Students and Adult Learners, Dr. Kevin Cantwell, Associate Provost for the Dublin and Warner Robins campuses, and Ms. Dee Lindsey, Executive Director of Veteran and Military Services, each contributed to the broader perspective on adult learning initiatives at MGA and other University System of Georgia (USG) institutions.

In reviewing the recent literature, I found that there is no one overarching definition of the adult learner (which some call "non-traditional" or even "post-traditional"), though we can make some generalizations about this group of students. The National Center for Education Statistics, for example, defines adult learners as meeting at least one of the following characteristics:

- Delayed enrollment into postsecondary education
- Attends college part-time
- Works full-time
- Financially independent (for financial aid purposes)
- Has dependents other than a spouse
- Single parent
- Does not have a high school diploma or GED credential<sup>1</sup>

According to the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB), adult learners are age 25 or older, do not seek postsecondary education immediately after high school, and are often returning to school to remain competitive in the workplace or change careers. These students have work and family responsibilities, rigid schedules, and tight budgets. Other barriers may include poor academic

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<sup>1</sup>Stephen G. Pelletier, "Success for Adult Students," *Public Purpose* (Fall 2010), accessed March 31, 2019, [https://www.aascu.org/uploadedFiles/AASCU/Content/Root/MediaAndPublications/PublicPurposeMagazines/Issue/10fall\\_adultstudents.pdf](https://www.aascu.org/uploadedFiles/AASCU/Content/Root/MediaAndPublications/PublicPurposeMagazines/Issue/10fall_adultstudents.pdf).

preparedness, low self-confidence, and a lack of information about services available to them as students.<sup>2</sup>

For the most part, MGA's definition falls within this broad framework. The main exception is that "non-traditional first-time college students" and "non-traditional freshmen transfer students" are defined by Admissions as those who graduated high school or should have graduated high school five or more years ago. For practical purposes, then, an adult learner may be someone 23 years of age or older. Further, when we consider military and veteran students, we understand that this group can also be described as adult learners, even though they may be younger than 23. Another consideration is that there are many students at our campuses who may be traditional-age students, are not connected to the military in any way, but who otherwise fit the definition of "adult learner" (e.g. as full-time caregivers for a child/parent/grandparent, working full-time, etc.)

Indeed, adult learners are a very diverse group, and they are important to MGA's future. In addition to other factors, millennials are having fewer children on average than did their parents and grandparents. While still recruiting traditional students aged 18-22, then, it is vital that we expand and improve our offerings for adult undergraduates as well. In many respects, we are already doing this. MGA has a dedicated admissions recruiter for non-traditional (dual-enrolled and adult) students. We also offer Prior Learning Assessments (PLAs), and a range of services for military / veteran students as well as a wide variety of online course offerings. In future, MGA Direct should serve as a viable pathway for students to earn degrees online when their work / family schedules would otherwise prevent them from taking classes. Additionally, the promotion of school-based strategies following the July 1 reorganization can help adult learners feel more connected to faculty, staff, and classmates in their chosen disciplines.

Getting a sense of what other USG institutions are doing to enroll and support adult undergraduates was key to this project. In Fall 2018, I visited the Center for Adult Learners and Veterans (CALV) at the University of West Georgia. CALV is open to all adult learners, veterans and dependents of veterans. It provides coffee, study lounge, conference / meeting rooms, computers, wi-fi access, as well as a range of resources and information particularly helpful for military-connected students. In Spring 2019, while attending a meeting of the Regents Academic Committee on Adult Learning (RACAL) and its annual Adult Learning Symposium, I also learned about Columbus State University's Adult Resource Center (ARC). Like CALV, the ARC offers a dedicated space for adult learners to study, relax, and connect with other adult students. Both centers, in terms of resources and information, are geared more toward military and veteran students. To the best of my knowledge, these are the only two centers of their type among USG institutions. While the others do not have these dedicated spaces, many are involved with a range of efforts to recruit adult learners and to make the transfer process as easy as possible for them.

I also wanted to get a sense of what our adult learners want, and so during the year I spoke with faculty and staff colleagues as well as students at the Dublin campus. I also participated in the "Getting Started" recruiting events at the Dublin and Cochran campuses in Fall 2018 as well as the Open Houses / Academic Showcases held at the Warner Robins and Dublin campuses in Spring 2019. In each case, I was able to speak with a range of prospective adult learners, most of whom had some prior college credit. During these discussions, I noted some commonalities:

- Students are excited about getting started

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<sup>2</sup>Southern Regional Education Board, "Who is the Adult Learner?" Accessed September 3, 2018. <https://www.sreb.org/general-information/who-adult-learner>

- They lack some self-confidence (the reasons vary from “I’m too old to do this” to “I’ve never taken an online class, but I have to because of my schedule” to “My children will resent the time spent away from them” to “What if the money runs out?”)
- Many students (especially those with no or few credits) are not sure how to choose a major
- They want more (or different) information than traditional students, especially about financial aid, access to resources after regular office hours, and future course schedules.

#### Recommendations

- 1) Establish a position within Academic Affairs that will serve as a university-wide adult learner liaison with students, faculty, and staff. Preferably, this Coordinator or Director of Adult Learning would be a faculty member with reassigned duties. A separate “space” for adult learners does not seem to be necessary, nor is it necessarily viable at the smaller campuses. A single point of contact / information however, certainly is.
- 2) Endorse the proposed MOU of the USG Adult Learning Consortium (ALC). The ALC is a group of USG institutions that actively collaborates on innovative strategies for adult college completion efforts. These efforts include Prior Learning Assessment, transfer and articulation policies, outreach to the military, public awareness campaigns, and collaborative online degrees. Representatives from member institutions meet once per year to report on progress and share information and expertise with other ALC members.
  - a) If joining the ALC is not possible, then we *should* consider implementing certain elements of its MOU in any case. Specifically, I highly recommend forming an Adult Learning Committee to further assess the needs of MGA’s adult learners.
- 3) Expand the current flexible scheduling in areas such as Advising/Registrar, Bursar’s Office, Bookstore, and Financial Aid, like those at the larger campuses during peak times (beginning of each semester, etc.) to encompass the smaller campuses, where students may be unable to travel due to work and family considerations.

I welcome additional discussion regarding what MGA can do to further support adult learners. Please free to contact me at [Kara.Svonavec@mga.edu](mailto:Kara.Svonavec@mga.edu) or (478) 274-7807.