

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## **MATURE STUDENTS IN THE PERSISTENCE PUZZLE: An Exploration of the Factors that Contribute to Mature Students' Health, Learning, and Retention in Post-Secondary Education**

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This research was conducted to gain in-depth knowledge about mature students' persistence in a university-college environment, with the ultimate aim of informing institutional student retention policies and practices. For the purpose of this study, mature students are broadly defined as individuals who are 25 years of age or older taking degree-level courses and who have adult life roles and circumstance, flexible enrolment status, and varied educational goals and intentions. The term, 'persistence,' was deliberately chosen for this study to place emphasis on the experience of learners and to distinguish it from the term, 'retention,' which focuses on institutional responses. The definition is also not limited to credential completion, but includes a diverse range of students' educational goals and aspirations.

The specific purpose of this exploratory study was to broaden and deepen our understanding of the multifaceted nature of mature students' lives and those factors exerting important influences on mature students' educational commitment and persistence. Of particular interest were those quality of life dimensions and relevant contextual factors that are associated with mature students' decisions to persist or withdraw in their first year of post-secondary education. This research is important, as there are few studies that take into consideration adult learners' unique life circumstances and educational challenges, and fewer still that explore adult quality of life influences on student retention.

**Prepared for:**

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The research project addressed two research priorities of the Canadian Council on Learning, namely, Barriers and Motivators to adult learning (by examining factors that facilitate or impede mature students' success) and Outcomes (by focusing on adults' unique and varied educational goals and aspirations). With adult learners constituting increasing proportions of the student population in post-secondary institutes, and given the escalating demand for accountability in this sector, there is a renewed emphasis on student retention and attrition research. Research at the university-college level offers an excellent opportunity to determine the challenges that adult learners face in post-secondary settings, along with the need for responsive campus programs, services, and resources.

### **Research Design**

Mature Students in the Persistence Puzzle explored the relationships between health-promotive environments and adult learners' educational commitment and persistence, placed within the conceptual framework of adult quality of life. Mixed methods were used for studying adult learners' quality of life and retention in the first year of general arts and science programs in a university-college environment. This included a phenomenological inquiry into mature students' first-year educational experiences, a focus group with faculty members teaching introductory arts and science courses, and secondary analyses of the age-aggregated data of the 2005/06 Pan-Canadian Study of College Students and First Year Outcomes to examine the major determinants of adult learners' educational commitment, confidence, satisfaction, and persistence.

### **Summary of Findings**

Eight main themes emerged from the qualitative data analysis focusing on: a) major life transitions; b) multifaceted educational goals; c) awareness of personal assets; d) relationships with professors; e) peer relationships; f) life-role conflicts; g) supportive institutional infrastructure; and h) experiential learning opportunities. In summary, all participants exhibited a strong commitment and desire to achieve their educational goals that were often broader and more varied than conventional degree attainment. The most influential contributor to students' successful integration into university-college life was their relationship with professors.

The results from the faculty focus group corroborated the main findings from the individual student interviews. In particular, faculty members acknowledged that mature students are more diverse, discriminating, determined, and goal-directed than their younger counterparts. Faculty members placed a similar emphasis on the importance of student-faculty relationships as a means to instill confidence and to support students' academic progress. It was also evident that faculty members give serious attention to incorporating experiential learning opportunities into their classroom activity and course designs. There was recognition that active teaching and learning practices validate mature students' life experiences and prior learning and have positive impacts on mature students' learning outcomes.

Results from the statistical comparison of the self-reported persistence, commitment, confidence, and satisfaction ratings for traditional and mature students showed that mature students appeared to be less inclined to change their programs and were more determined, confident, and satisfied with their

faculty relationships and classroom experiences than their younger counterparts. When viewed in relation to the detailed accounts of students' personal assets and their positive post-secondary experiences, there was evidence to suggest that faculty and staff have a strong role to play in reinforcing the advantages of mature students' significant life experience and academic strengths. Student participation and group interaction were considered especially important during the crucial first semesters.

Standard multiple regression analyses were performed on the age-aggregated data of the 2005/06 Pan-Canadian Study. Overall, study findings revealed that goal orientation, perceived relevance of studies, student-faculty relationships, and financial concerns were the most influential contributors to mature students' educational commitment and persistence. The implications for faculty, student development staff, and educational leaders are discussed, along with practical strategies for creating and maintaining a health-promotive campus environment to optimize adult learners' quality of life and retention.