

Career Development Needs of Re-entry Women
in Appalachian Kentucky
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Running Head: RE-ENTRY WOMEN

Abstract

A survey of re-entry women in Appalachian Kentucky was conducted to obtain demographic data, a needs assessment, and input from the women concerning possible services for them.

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Much has been written about the Appalachian woman. She has been praised, pitied, scorned and devalued. She is a "coal miner's daughter," "a welfare mama," "culturally and economically deprived." The never-ending assortment of labels, role stereotypes, and political arguments concerning the Appalachians has only increased the confusion of the Appalachian woman as she strives to know and better herself. Deeply entrenched in the values of a unique way of life, the Appalachian woman has unmet career and educational needs related to growing up female in Appalachia. The mature Appalachian woman, 25 years and older, is unique as her situation is compounded by the fact that she has grown up in an age of unprecedented social and technological change. "While Appalachian women share many experiences and circumstances in common with American women in general, and with rural American women in particular, the economic, social and political history and circumstances peculiar to the region have forged life experiences for females in Appalachia which merit independent attention" (Lord and Patton-Crowder, 1979, p.v.).

Women in the Appalachian Kentucky region make up 37% of the employed work force (1980 Census of Kentucky). Consistent with national data, the Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) file for Occupations by Sex (EEO, 1980) shows that women in Appalachian Kentucky make up 31% of the Executive, Administrative, and Managerial occupational group and 77% of the Administrative Support group. There has been an influx of women in Appalachian Kentucky into the work force.

"The correlation between a good job and a good education has

not gone unnoticed by women in the work force" (Fisher-Thompson & Kuhn, 1981, p. 1). Nationwide, women are returning to school. Although the Carnegie Council on Policy Studies in Higher Education (1980) has predicted a 23% decline in college enrollment of 18-24 year olds by 1997, they also predict that this decline will be partially offset by increases in women, 25 and older, and minorities. This trend toward non-traditional students has already appeared in public 2-year colleges (Bird & Heyns, 1979). The National Center for Educational Statistics forecasts that older students will account for public community college enrollment increasing from 3.9 million in 1978 to 4.2 million in 1988; moreover, older students already comprise 40% of the enrollment at 2-year colleges (Fisher-Thompson & Kuhn, 1981). According to a 1981 survey by the Commerce Department's Census Bureau, women currently outnumber men among all college students. Many of these women are females who have entered or returned to college after being out of the educational system for some time. For this study there were over 3000 women, 25 and older, identified as undergraduate students in the colleges and universities throughout Appalachian Kentucky alone.

A review of the literature on re-entry women points up some characteristics and common difficulties of this group.

The problems faced by the older woman are numerous, and may be characterized as either institutional or personal according to Ryan (1979). Institutional problems include availability of accurate information, financial aid restrictions, lack of counseling and support services, and failure to receive credit for earlier education or life experiences. Examples of personal problems are lack of self-confidence, guilt that results from

conflicting school and home demands, and lack of spousal support.

The Project on the Status and Education of Women, Association of American Colleges (Weinstein, 1980), has identified needs of re-entry women and suggested programs to met those needs. They state that institutions can be more responsive to the needs of these women in the areas of recruitment and admissions by developing specific materials, workshops, and admissions packets, and also by recruiting women for traditionally "male" academic programs (Weinstein, 1980). Financial aid, a common problem of the re-entry woman, provides another area in which institutions could be more responsive. Dunkle (1980) suggests more flexible financing, cost breaks, aid for part-time students, and emergency assistance. Once recruitment, admissions, and financial needs are met, support services for success become essential. Gleaves and Hall (1981) list academic, career, and personal counseling and basic skills help as the most important needs in the area of support services for special populations of re-entry women. They suggest better information services, such as a newsletter, extra-curricular activities for women and their families, career counseling programs, basic skills and refresher courses, and a study skills and reading workshop.

A study by Cirksena and Magill (1978) of 124 women enrolled in a women's re-entry program in the southern San Francisco bay area found that most women (64%) were married, in their thirties, and had returned to school for intellectual stimulation or to receive job training. Significant differences were found in the areas of reasons for returning and income between women who were married and those who were heads of households.

A study at Northwestern University surveyed potential

re-entry students from the surrounding area (Johns, 1979). It was discovered that the respondents were angry and frustrated with Northwestern for not making them feel welcome. Flexible scheduling and part-time classes had not been incorporated into a returning student program for older students.

More pertinent to the Appalachian area was a study by Graves (1983) concerning the counseling needs of all college women at Morehead State University in Kentucky. In a survey that asked the women to rate how much each of 27 pressures had been a problem to them, the five most outstanding concerns were test anxiety, lack of self-confidence, managing stress, managing time, and feeling depressed. The present study of re-entry women attending 14 different institutions in the 1983 spring semester investigated both institutional and personal needs. The intention of this research was to determine the needs of women returning to school in Appalachian Kentucky as perceived by the women themselves, to provide demographic data about these women, and to solicit their input for the development of services that could be provided by colleges and universities within the region.

Method

Sample

The re-entry women were identified as those attending the fourteen colleges and universities located in the 49 county region of east and southeast Kentucky designated as Appalachia by the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC Annual Report, 1982).

A random sample of 1000 of the women identified was selected to receive a survey by mail. In order to insure that a representative number of women from each institution received a questionnaire, a stratified method of sampling was employed.

Procedure

After a review of the literature, a survey instrument was designed to collect demographic data about the respondents, obtain a needs assessment by rating problems on a scale of 1 to 5, and solicit comments from the respondents. This instrument was submitted to qualified counseling and/or research personnel at three area universities for review. The survey instrument was then refined in accordance with a number of the suggestions. A field-test was conducted with a random sample of 20 of the re-entry women, in Appalachian Kentucky, and subsequently, additional adjustments were made to finalize the instrument.

Results

Of the 1000 surveys mailed, a total of 636 respondents were received producing a response rate of 63.6%. Of these, 582 responses were used in the data analysis. Respondents who had previously earned a Bachelor's degree (44) and those who were under 25 years of age (3) were eliminated from consideration. Incomplete questionnaires (3), women who felt they did not fit the category (3), and one who indicated no time to complete the survey, make up the remaining responses. Of the original mailings, 14 were undeliverable.

The majority of the women (58.1%) were born in Appalachian Kentucky, 9.5% were born in Appalachian areas outside of Kentucky and the remaining 32.4% of the women were born in non-Appalachian areas. The largest age category of women was 25-29 (35.8%) but there were 25.2% in the 30-34 range and 16.2% in the 35-39 range. Therefore, most of the women responding were between the ages of 25 and 39 (80.2%).

Married women comprised 67.8% of the respondents: divorced

women, the second largest group by marital status, made up 17.1% of the total. Eighty-three percent of the women had children. By race/ethnic origin, 95.2% of the women responding were white, 2.8% black, and 2% fell into other categories.

A wide range of income levels was reported by the women. It should be noted that a sizeable portion (33.4%) fell into the categories earning less than \$12,000 per annum. By contrast, a minority (29%) claimed an income of \$24,000+ a year.

Over one-third of the women (37.1%) reported having some college experience prior to their returning to school. Those having no additional education or training beyond high school made up 27.8% of the women; additionally, women who had completed the GED with no further educational experience made up 12.9% of the women responding.

The majority of the women (56.5%) were employed, and 74.7% of those employed were employed full-time. The three most frequently reported occupations were secretary (14.2%), nurse (13.7%), and homemaker (13.1%). Classification of the responses to this item into occupational groups showed the largest group to be administrative support (31.2%), followed by health services (25.0%).

The participants in the survey were asked to indicate up to three reasons for their returning to school. There were four options available; 75% reported self-fulfillment; 54%, economic necessity; 43%, job-training; and 12% cited other reasons.

When asked about their decision on a major program of study, 83.3% indicated they had made a decision. However, 35.3% reported themselves as not sure or fairly sure about their decision. Only 28.2% reported having taken advantage of career counseling

services. Table 1 summarizes major programs of study.

Insert Table 1 about here

There were 30 needs, or areas of concern that the women rated on a scale of 1 to 5, indicating how much of a problem had occurred in that area. Four of these concerns, fatigue, role conflict, stress, and test anxiety, had means greater than 3.00. Eleven were rated as average to major difficulties by over 50% of the women. Table 2 illustrates the results of the needs assessment.

Insert Table 2 about here

The last part of the survey solicited the comments and suggestions of the women responding. In this section there were 181 suggestions made for services that institutions could provide to re-entry women. These suggestions were categorized into eight different groups. The three areas receiving the most comments were advising and counseling services (28%), better financial aid services (20%), and scheduling classes (18%). The remaining suggestions fell into the categories of facilities, day care services, programs of study, academic support, and recognition of special needs.

Under advising and counseling services, the respondents suggested an advising center for re-entry women, evening and off-campus advising services, "help" seminars, and orientation specifically for returning adult students. Career planning services as well as more counseling about traditionally

male-oriented occupational choices were suggested. Among the suggestions for a support group organization was the comment of one re-entry woman, who added, "but we probably wouldn't have time to attend anyway."

Suggestions concerning financial aid services included initiating a jobs program to help students find part-time work and making aid available to part-time students. The financial plight of the part-time re-entry woman was frequently reiterated: she must work full-time to support, or help support, the family; therefore, she can only attend school part-time and, subsequently, is denied financial aid.

Scheduling classes was an area that the women felt needed more flexibility. They suggested weekend colleges, late afternoon (5:30-7:30) classes, more higher level classes at night, and more off-campus classes.

Other suggestions included help in finding day care, especially for emergency or snow days, a lounge area specifically for re-entry students, special or isolated housing areas, refresher courses in the basics, and offering a greater variety of degrees that could be earned in off-campus locations.

Discussion

From the data analysis, a profile of the average re-entry woman in Appalachian Kentucky emerges. She was born in an Appalachian region, is white, in her late twenties or thirties, and is married with an average of 1.8 children. She is from a low to middle income group and probably works outside the home either part- or full-time. Her job, in all likelihood, falls into the administrative support or health services occupational groups.

The main reason for the re-entry woman's return to school is

self-fulfillment, but that is generally coupled with a need to obtain a better-paying, or specific, job through additional education. She has already made a decision about her program of study and is confident in that decision. More than likely, she is majoring in nursing, elementary education, or business administration.

The profile of re-entry women in Appalachian Kentucky raises some questions concerning the direction in which the women are going. Their expectations include an earned degree and a good job to go along with it. Yet nursing, elementary education, and business administration are areas in which either salary or opportunity is limited in the Appalachian Kentucky region. The women are returning to school in spite of financial and personal problems, but relatively few have sought the help of a career counselor to aid in making important decisions. The implication here is that many women, after years of sacrifice, may find bitter disappointment instead of new opportunities when they have completed their degree. As one respondent put it, "I graduated in 1981 and in 1983 and my degrees are gathering dust."

The findings of this study related to the major decisions and possible disappointments of re-entry women help to support the recommendations mentioned earlier by Weinstein (1980). Recruiting women into traditionally "male" academic programs and more counseling for women concerning non-traditional occupational choices are two areas in which institutions can work to be more responsive.

When considering the areas of greatest concern, as determined by the means, it seems that they are interrelated and more personal than institutional. There seemed to be at least three

categories of personal concerns. These are the re-entry woman's ability to:

1. perform successfully in school;
2. manage efficiently at home, and
3. cope effectively with a changing self image.

Concerns related to performing successfully in school are sharpening basic skills, re-developing study skills, and test anxiety. Lack of self-confidence can be included here, but may tend to permeate all three categories of concerns. Identification of these concerns as major difficulties by the re-entry women helps to support Gleaves and Hall (1981) in their listing of academic counseling and basic skills help as some of the most important needs in the area of support services.

Under the category of managing efficiently at home are concerns related to time management, household duties, and finances. Struggling to make ends meet, to tend to family needs, and still find time for studying is part of the juggling act that must be performed if the re-entry woman is to continue her endeavor successfully.

The category of coping effectively with a changing self-image includes concerns about neglecting children and husbands, establishing priorities, and experiencing role conflict. The emphasis given to these concerns seems to support the major theoretical finding of Mezirow (1978) in a study of re-entry programs for women in community colleges across the nation. He found that the central process occurring in the women was a reconstruction of their personal frame of reference, self-concept, and goals. Mezirow referred to this process as perspective transformation and indicated that aiding in this process is a

responsibility of higher education. He states, "the re-entry function is one for which every university and college will have to plan" (Mezirow, 1978, p. 10).

In response to the findings of this study and related studies, it is suggested that advising and counseling centers at colleges and universities employ at least one professional who is specifically trained in the needs and problems of returning women students. A re-entry specialist would work to develop, deliver, and evaluate programs for re-entry students in the following areas: recruitment and admissions; financial aid; academic support; information, advising, and counseling services; and institutional recognition of special needs. Some specific services that would benefit re-entry women are:

1. recruitment directed at older students;
2. more grants and scholarships specifically for re-entry women;
3. financial aid packages for part-time adult students;
4. tutoring and learning lab facilities;
5. individual and career counseling;
6. evening hours for specialized curricula and advising services;
7. orientation specifically for re-entry students;
8. seminars for faculty and staff designed to foster institutional recognition of special needs;
9. a directory of local day care centers; and
10. more varied selection of programs and degrees.

For the purpose of reviewing, assessing and developing new policies and programs for re-entry students, a task force could be organized by the administration of an institution. The task force

would include faculty and staff from admissions, financial aid, counseling services, academic departments, curriculum development, and student affairs, as well as an interested re-entry woman and re-entry specialist. By reviewing current policies and programs and assessing their applicability and availability with regard to the needs of the re-entry students, this task force could then recommend changes that would be more feasible.

The findings of this study are limited in their application to program development. A closer look at sub-groups by reason for returning, occupation, and major program of study would provide more career oriented information. This study has surveyed only the re-entry women who were enrolled in school during the 1983 spring semester. Additional research would be valuable for two other groups: the re-entry drop-out and the re-entry graduate. However, the ever-increasing number of women returning to college makes it imperative for institutions to respond now to the needs and problems of re-entry women.

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Table I
Major Programs of Study Reported by Re-Entry Women*

Program	% Enrolled
Health Related	34.00
Business	24.15
Education	19.44
Social Sciences	4.70
Community Services	4.49
Computers and Informational Science	4.27
Architecture	1.71
Humanities	1.28
Trade, Industry and Technology	1.07
Biological Science	.86
Home Economics	.64
Fine and Applied Arts	.64
Communications	.64
Mathematics	.64
Foreign Language	.42
Engineering	.42
General Studies	.42
Agriculture	.21

*By ACT General Major Categories

Table 2
Needs Identified by Re-entry Women

Areas of Concern	N	Mean	% indicating average to major difficulty
Experiencing fatigue	575	3.2313	74.96
Conflict among various roles	527	3.1860	70.02
Experiencing test anxiety	579	3.1520	76.17
Managing stress	573	3.0890	74.17
Managing household duties	569	2.9666	66.61
Re-developing study skills	578	2.8997	66.44
Feeling guilty about neglecting children	424	2.8184	59.20
Managing time	580	2.8034	57.93
Securing adequate financial resources	546	2.7766	54.95
Lacking self-confidence	580	2.6897	53.97
Sharpening basic skills	579	2.5941	56.65
Establishing priorities bet. home/school	560	2.5393	48.21
Feeling guilty about neglecting husband	434	2.4700	46.77
Finding needed information	570	2.3246	39.30
Scheduling classes	569	2.3040	40.07
Providing emergency child care	382	2.2775	37.43
Experiencing conflict with demands of job	417	2.1535	35.01
Finding counseling services available	544	2.1471	34.56
Finding suitable day care services	304	2.1020	33.88
Maintaining a social life	550	2.0927	35.46
Having someone to talk with who understands	568	2.0687	32.75
Feeling isolated on campus	530	2.0245	29.25

Table 2 (con't)

Areas of Concern	N	Mean	% indicating average to major difficulty
Communicating with advisor	553	1.9946	28.93
Establishing career goals	563	1.9645	30.20
Lacking encouragement from family	554	1.9314	26.71
Adjusting to college environment	560	1.9018	27.14
Deciding on a major	562	1.8950	26.87
Competing with younger students	574	1.8118	15.61
Transferring credits	424	1.6958	19.58
Being sexually harrassed by professors	553	1.1013	2.35