

**"Traffic Jams, Speed Limits, Potholes, and Open Roads: The Intersections of Adult Learners"**

**Workshop, "The Whole Student: Intersectionality and Well-Being" conference  
(Chicago, May, 2017)  
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Welcome, everyone. My name is David Scobey, and it's my pleasure to welcome you to "Traffic Jams, Speed Limits, Potholes, and Open Roads: The Intersections of Adult Learners." Our goal in this workshop to put the themes of this conference—educating the whole student, supporting her well-being as integral to her education, thinking about intersectionality as an important framework for understanding the well-being of the whole student—our goal is to bring these themes into dialogue with the experience of adult, working, nontraditional students. I currently serve as Senior Scholar for The Graduate! Network, a national network of more than two dozen community-based initiatives whose mission is to support adults returning to and succeeding at college. With me are two colleagues: Kimberly Lowe Sawyer, herself an alumna of the Network and currently a doctoral student in education studies at Holy Family University doing research on the needs of adult students; and also Adam Bush, Provost of College Unbound, an experimental (and to my eye, exemplary) bachelor's program for nontraditional students.

Our assumption is that many perhaps most of you are here precisely because your institutions have not yet grappled, or are just starting to grapple, with the needs of adult college learners; or perhaps because you already have a critical mass of nontraditional students but want to think more fully about their well-being, about educating the whole nontraditional student. Our hope is to catalyze conversation about these issues, first with some brief presentations and then with small-group discussion.

I'll start with a demographic and social overview of adult learners and offer some thoughts about key practices that support their success and well-being—as well as the value of an intersectional approach to understanding them. Kim will talk about both her own story and her research on the importance of validation to student success. Adam will discuss College Unbound and its practices of student support and community-building as an example of the kind of educational design work we believe higher education needs to engage. We've also given out a handout that has the beginnings of a resource list, as well as our contact information if you want to follow up. All this is meant to take up the first half of the workshop. In the second half, we hope to spark collective discussion by offering three prompts, also on the backside of the hand-out.

Before I start, I'd like to offer a brief thought about our theme in this conference: intersectionality. Many maybe most of you will know the roots of this idea in black feminism, associated especially with the scholarship and activism of Kimberle Crenshaw and others and associated especially with the struggles of women. This conference is part of a larger taking-up of “intersectionality” as a framework for thinking the interconnectedness of identities, needs, and struggles, especially among marginalized people. As its currency has grown for all good reasons, so have concerns about its appropriation in settings that forget its roots in the experience of women of color. I'm mindful of this critique; I hope that our discussion honors the taproot of an intersectional framework by illuminating what is for me a crucial struggle for inclusion and recognition in higher education, a democratic project aimed at holistically supporting students whose needs have been marginalized and misunderstood.

Let me speak to that marginalization in my own career. I started teaching thirty years ago. From the beginning I sought to teach and support my students as whole people. I was

committed to a democratic vision of higher education, founding and leading programs in community-based learning and civic engagement. I tried to sustain a special commitment to inclusion and diversity, to personal and institutional support for marginalized students: students of color, working-class and poor students, first-generation students, immigrants and refugee students. Even when I failed, that was my commitment. But I think that for most of my career, I was fairly clueless about who my students were. Or rather: not my immediate students, since I mainly taught in more privileged settings, but the majority of American college students. I didn't know that about half of U.S. undergraduates were financially independent of their childhood families. Nearly half attended college part-time. One-third worked full-time, and well more than half worked at least 20 hours a week. Even when I thought about non-white and non-middle-class students, I had a conventional picture in my head: someone right out of high school, attending a two- or four-year college full-time, whose parents had filled out the FAFSA form, someone on the cusp of adulthood. It turns out that this profile only accounts for about one in four undergraduates. About the same proportion as undergraduates who have children of their own.

As I said, I was clueless about all this. And so were many perhaps most of my colleagues, even those doing the very best work of inclusion and equity. That all changed for me about six or seven years ago. I was the dean of a division at The New School with an adult bachelor's program, and those students schooled me about who they were, what they needed and aspired to, and how poorly our university and the academy as a whole supported their well-being and learning. Their intentionality and resilience won my heart. And when I came to realize that they weren't just amazing outliers, but part of a marginalized majority, they changed the course of my career. I began to research and write about adult, working, nontraditional students, especially through field-work and oral histories that paid attention to

their own voices and lives. Exemplary programs like College Unbound, where Adam Bush is Provost, are central to that research, pointing the way toward new models of education that support the whole, nontraditional student. And as I noted, I ended up starting work as Senior Scholar at The Graduate! Network, working to do research and make change that supports “comebackers,” as we call them in the Network. Kim is such a “comebacker.” Her story and her research are essential to understanding the well-being of adult learners.

I’ve already given you some of the top-line demographics about this nontraditional majority. According to Federal census numbers, about 75% of American undergraduates have at least one nontraditional marker (delayed enrollment, part-time study, full-time work, financial independence, taking care of dependents, among others). Well over half of all students have at least two of these markers. About 35-40% are 25 years old or older; but among those who under 25, there are as many nontraditional undergraduates as those who fit the traditional norm. The 22-year-old barrista and construction worker are more like the 35-year-old Iraq War veteran, the displaced factor worker, the parent working part-time jobs, the formerly incarcerated person, than they are like the 21-year-old recent high-school grad attending college full-time. Not surprisingly, working learners and college-going parents are more likely to be black and Latino, first-generation and low-income, than traditional undergraduates; but these ethnoracial and socio-economic disparities are actually smaller than we might assume—usually single-digit differences in percentages. The nontraditional majority cuts across lines of race, gender, age, region, immigration status and judicial status. Everything except social class.

These students are incredibly diverse, then. But my teaching experience and my research suggest that they share three things. First is the social and role-complexity of their lives. Traditional, post-high school, full-time undergraduates, even those who aren’t middle

class or wealthy, are largely able to organize their social lives and work lives around a central role as students. Nontraditional, adult, working, parenting undergraduates have to fit those studies into a complex force-field of family, work, community, income, and debt. Second, this social complexity means emotional complexity as well. Nearly every adult learner I know expresses some kind of embarrassment, anger, or even shame about their relationship to college. Having strayed from the normative script of high-school-to-college, they have to confront what Wendy Spencer (a student in Evergreen State College's Evening and Weekend Studies Program) called "the less-than feeling," the sense of not-belonging, not being welcome, not being recognized, and not as an occasional hurt, but as the everyday, default feeling of starting or restarting college. And all of that is intensified by the third commonality of being nontraditional: confronting an academy designed for someone else. The most obvious exclusions are temporal: the course schedule and office hours of faculty and student-support staff. But even some stonewalling from a financial-aid staffer or inflexibility from a faculty instructor can reinforce the "less-than feeling."

These challenges are all interconnected—intersectional. They make adult learners both the resilient and the most precarious students I know. Any bump in the road—a kid's illness, a change in work-shifts, a car out of commission—can become an educational crisis. Doubly so when the math professor is inflexible about the pace of the lesson plan and the financial aid office can't help with emergency supplemental aid. As a result, adult, working learners succeed and graduate far less often than others. Research suggests that bachelor's students with at least two of the nontraditional demographic markers I mentioned above graduate at one-third the rate of their traditional peers. The U.S. now has 35 to 40 million working adults with some college credits but no degree, about 20% of our population between 25 and 64.

There's a complicated historical story about how all this came to be over the past 40 years—a story I won't get into here. But the result is a higher education landscape in which the lives, constraints, and strengths of most college students—the intersections of material need, social identity, emotional stakes, educational aspiration, and institutional marginality--go unrecognized. Until we do recognize the lives of adult, working students at the intersections, we will not be able to see them whole and teach them as whole students.

Our response has to be as complex and interwoven as the lives of adult learners themselves. It involves improvements in the infrastructure of student services, in curriculum and pedagogy, in the academic calendar, in the awarding of credit and credentials. But here let me end by focusing on the theme of this conference—student well-being—with a few suggestions and then turn things over to Kim and Adam. What practices might contribute to the education of adult learners as whole students, to their distinctive needs for well-being (which sometimes overlap, sometimes diverge from those of traditional undergraduates)? I'd emphasize three things.

First of all, beginning by asking the students themselves about their aspirations, needs, and challenges—don't assume you know what they need. This is especially important at a moment when policy-makers, educational thought-leaders, and increasingly academic administrators believe that what adult learners want and need is accelerated, short-term workforce training. Don't get me wrong: nontraditional students worry about their economic security, about the cost of college, about their job prospects—just as traditional students do. But perhaps even more than traditional students, they connect these materials hopes and anxieties to family aspirations, community responsibilities, and personal goals. Someone who believes that the great majority of adult, working learners want quick,

technical, skill-building for the next job have not spent much time listening to adult, working learners. Their well-being has to begin with having their lives and their agency recognized.

Second, my own oral history and ethnographic research and a host of other research underscores that academic institutions, staff, and faculty need to work with relentless empathy to overcome the less-than feeling, to find ways every day and week to convey to nontraditional students, “you belong here.” Sometimes that climate of welcome involves bureaucratic flexibility; sometimes, a weekly ritual of beginning classes with personal celebration; sometimes, the intrusive phone call to find out why a student didn’t show for an appointment. Whatever else is needed, the underlying, repeated message of care from teachers, advisers, and the institution is essential. And that may require some training of faculty, since our professional culture does not default to care.

Finally, an institutional culture of support and well-being for adult students has to be “horizontal” as well as “vertical.” It needs to create peer cultures of adult-to-adult support as integral to the educational experience. Precisely because so many nontraditional students experience their return to college as marginalizing and isolating—even as they lean into it with passion—their support for each other is key. I’ve literally dozens of stories in which students wouldn’t let other students fail or retreat. Colleges and programs can do much to support and reward such peer cultures.

When such attentive, empathetic, relentlessly support educational work happens—both between students and faculty-staff and among students themselves—the results can be breathtaking. I interviewed Melissa Miranda, an alumna of College Unbound, where Adam is Provost. She had grown up in a working-class family in Rhode Island, never thinking that college was for her—and, more importantly, thinking that she had no journey, no story, because of that. Looking back from the vantage-point of having completed her bachelor’s

(and in fact an MBA after that), she told me: “So I guess it was more of a case of mistaken identity, of myself. Growing up, ...you just kind of put yourself in that bucket, and you're that way: ‘I'm a low class, working class-type of person.’ I couldn't visualize myself doing anything bigger or better.” Later in the interview, she reflected: “Now I had my bachelor's, and it was like, ‘Wow. Wait a minute. I have arrived.’ But then I thought, ‘What did I arrive to?’ ‘This has been a lifelong journey for me.’...And it felt surreal and it was almost like I was able to climb out of the box. That box that I had held myself in, like ‘this is my family history, this is who we are, you don't go above that.’ You talk about a glass ceiling. I was in a little brown paper box. Suddenly I got out of that box, and I was like, ‘All right. Now I am one of you, but I'm still me. And I'm one of everybody else.’”

For me, the power of Melissa's story isn't at all that a person without a bachelor's is low-class. It's that, for her, education was what we want it to be for everyone: a means of emancipation. Of no longer being the cipher in a case of mistaken identity, of herself. Too often nontraditional students remains cases of mistaken identity, stuck in little brown paper boxes of our making. We need to change that.