

ABSTRACT

Title: Perceived Service Satisfaction and Its Impact on Adult Students' Persistence in Higher Education:
A Qualitative Study of Female Adult Students
From a Small Public University

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The primary purpose of this study was to examine adult students' higher education service experiences in order to determine whether perceived service satisfaction is a predictor of academic persistence. Participants' perceptions about service, both in academic and non-academic environments, and resulting satisfaction/dissatisfaction and persistence/non-persistence decisions were explored.

A descriptive and interpretative case study design was employed to analyze data gathered from a small, select group of six former adult students. From analysis of three focus group meetings and reflective writing, specific conditions, encounters, and perceptions of service satisfaction were uncovered. A questionnaire was used initially to purposefully identify and select the research participants. Subsequent focus group meetings were held with guiding questions derived from total quality management and customer service practices.

The study findings support contemporary research that concludes adult students consider themselves to be consumers of higher education. Further, non-traditional students enter and exit higher education experiences with many of the same service expectations and perceptions they have with non-academic organizations. Persistence for adult

students, according to these findings, is a combination of attribution and integration factors, although weighted differently and shaped by the individual adult learner's experiences, background, and personal situation. Service satisfaction perceptions matched the blend of psychological dimensions of adulthood and chronological age as defined in Hudson's model of adult stage development, and adult student retention is directly related to adult student satisfaction measurement and input.

Recommendations for future research, practice, and theory building include replications of the study in other settings and with other populations, longitudinal investigations of service satisfaction by additional stakeholders in higher education, and inquiries into the balance between attribution and integration factors in the persistence decision-making process of adult students.