**Research to Practice**

**Working with Young Adults in College Transition Programs**

The NCTN Research to Practice Briefs are designed to disseminate emerging college transition research from a variety of sources in a user-friendly format.

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**Introduction**

With adult basic education (ABE) programs experiencing increases in youth enrollment over the past decade (Hayes, 1999; Rachal & Bingham, 2004) and colleges and universities witnessing a surge in the overall enrollment of non-traditional adult students (Darkenwalk & Novak, 1997), college transition programs must increasingly decide how best to serve older and younger students alike. This task is not without its challenges. Educators often struggle to meet the needs of older adults, who often have more concrete educational and career goals in mind, while at the same time they deal with younger students whose career and educational plans may be less defined. Compared to their peers with more life experience, adult-education students aged 16-24 may also be less mature, less motivated, and less responsible (Flugman, Perin, & Spiegel, 2003).

The purpose of this brief is to identify the challenges of working with older and younger students in college transition classes, as well as to present strategies that four successful programs use in their work with younger students, specifically those aged 16-24. To address these questions, we consulted literature related to working with younger students in ABE classes and postsecondary institutions. To obtain advice on promising practices for this population, we also interviewed administrators of four programs of the New England ABE-to-College Transition project that have completion rates of 65% or higher. Thus, this study combines the extant literature with qualitative interviews to identify strategies related to recruitment, behavioral management, curriculum and instruction, counseling, and staffing.

**Featured Transition Programs**

**GAP Program at New Haven Adult and Continuing Education Center** (New Haven, CT): Approximately 38% of the students enrolled in transition classes each semester are between the ages of 17 and 24. While GAP is a dual enrollment program in which students studying for their GED or high school diploma take classes for college credit, it also welcomes graduates and students who did not complete or pass developmental courses at the local community college. Each course (math, reading, writing, study skills, computers, and introduction to the health professions) meets for three hours per week for 15 weeks. According to a 2006 evaluation, 86% of students who enrolled in at least one course successfully completed the class. Of those students, 59% went on to enroll in community college.

**The Success Program at Cape Cod Community College** (Hyannis, MA): Approximately one-third of the students in this one-semester program are younger than 25. Students attend nine hours of class per week and participate in a “College 101” course (consisting of reading, writing, study skills, and career exploration) along with math and computer courses. This program has an 87% completion rate, with 85% of completers later enrolling in college classes.

**The Tutorial Center** (Bennington, VT): Nearly 55% of the students served at The Tutorial Center's Bridge-to-College Program are 24 years of age or younger. The Tutorial Center offers a two-semester college transition program in which students attend two four-hour class sessions per week. Classes include Academic Skills Development (reading, writing, math), Introduction to College Studies, Effective Leadership, and Career and Life Planning. Sixty-five percent of students complete this transition program and enroll in college classes. Of the students who go on to college, 75% test out of developmental education courses.

**Vernon Regional Adult Basic Education** (Vernon, CT): The College Transition Program has historically served only adults over the age of 24. Evening students meet for six hours per week, while weekend students attend four hours of class each Saturday. VRABE also provides a transitions class for young adults enrolled in its state-funded high school credit diploma program. Throughout this brief, distinctions are made between the adult program and the youth-based class. The College Transition Program has a 65% retention rate, with 75% of completers going on to college. No postsecondary statistics are available for the youth-based class.
Which characteristics distinguish younger students from older adults?

While developmental psychologists identify numerous distinctions between younger and older adults, four key differences emerged from both the literature and the interviews: behavior, identity, confidence, and stability. Although interviewees did note that young students possessed greater familiarity with technology and higher self-efficacy than the adult students, it was these four key differences that seemed to most influence their practice.

Behavior. In case studies of ABE programs, researchers found that teachers describe younger students as more disruptive, more likely to exhibit attentional challenges, and more likely to be involved in risky activities, such as gang involvement and substance abuse, than their older counterparts (Flugman et al., 2003; Hayes, 1999; Perin et al., 2006). Interviewees acknowledged similar behavioral challenges. Jack Glade, executive director of The Tutorial Center's Bridge-to-College program in Vermont, noted that young males, for example, are more likely to exhibit aggressive behavior than older students. "The research tells us that younger males have a higher level of physical activity need. They may lash out, challenge, and try physical intimidation with staff and students, not necessarily in a violent way, but in a very active way. They are more likely to be belligerent. It is part of how they are wired at their age," he said. While emphasizing that many young males do not exhibit such behaviors, Glade explained that female and older male students rarely demonstrate such aggression.

Identity. Developmentally speaking, younger transition students are at a critical period of "emerging adulthood" during which identity formation is even more pronounced and rapid than in adolescence (Arnett, 2000). Consequently, while older adults tend to enroll in transition programs with specific goals, younger students have less certain future plans, according to all four interview participants. "The young student enters because it is another step in an educational path. They are young and have recently been in public school within a couple of years, and they are thinking about educational steps. For older adults, it is more tied to life experiences, not just another education step for them. The older student understands the value of what they are getting more than younger students because they have life experience to draw on," said Glade.

Confidence. Perhaps because of a deeper understanding of the importance of college, older students are often more anxious about their studies than younger students, according to several interviewees. "Adults are scared to death about coming into the program. They don’t think they have what it takes to make it through college, and they are extremely math-phobic," said Christine Howard, program coordinator of Vernon Regional Adult Basic Education (VRABE) in Connecticut. In contrast, younger students are more confident, though they often lack a full understanding of the academic challenges ahead, according to Joseph Magyar, program administrator of Gateway-Advanced Adult Education program (GAP) in New Haven, Connecticut.

Stability. While younger students frequently have the same life challenges as older adults, including homelessness, unemployment or underemployment, childcare issues, transportation issues, and fragmented home lives, they may have greater difficulty managing these obstacles. "If there is any difference, the older person can probably handle the issues with a bit more maturity and probably not give up or want to give up as the younger person often would. Younger people are much more willing to throw in the towel when the going gets rough, which is a sign of their youth," said Magyar.

Given these key differences, interviewees identified strategies that they use to deal with the differences in behavior, identity, confidence, and stability. While interviewees did not all share identical philosophies or strategies for working with youth, they did agree that it was important to be thoughtful about the decisions they make when working with younger students.

How do some successful programs recruit younger students?

Given the different reasons that younger and older students may enroll in college transition programs, it is important to tailor recruitment methods according to age group.

Adults at GAP decide to enroll in the program primarily as a result of word-of-mouth reports from their peers, but younger students need a bit more persuasion, explained program coordinator Katrina Jones. She delivers workshops in the program's high school credit completion courses. "The young people do not feel right away that they are in college. You have to let them know that 'If you're enrolled in this program, you're a college student. You'll have a college ID and be able to access the services of the college, meet pre-college academic requirements, if necessary, and earn college credit.'" As a further incentive, she reminds these younger students that they have the opportunity to apply credit from the college transition program toward their high school diploma.

The Tutorial Center in Vermont taps into its community resources and uses advertising to recruit different types of students. With strong connections to local high schools and its relationship with a youth employment specialist, the Center is able to recruit young high school dropouts into adult education classes and then into its college transition program. Meanwhile, the Tutorial Center features 20-something students in their public service advertisements about the transition program and older adults in their workplace literacy ads.

Although the recruitment strategies differ, all of the programs leverage the resources available to them. Whether younger students are responding primarily to the incentive of college and high school credit or to marketing techniques is a question worthy of future research.

What are effective strategies for managing the behavior of younger students?

While some studies indicate that enforcing established rules are a component of successful ABE programs (Flugman et al., 2003; Hayes, 1999; Imel, 2003; Perin et al., 2006), many practitioners encourage educators to engage students in creating their own classroom guidelines (i.e. Mongeau, 2002). Interviewees in this current study described a range of different management strategies, with some strictly enforcing rules and others adopting lenient policies to work with younger disruptive students.

At Cape Cod Community College's Success Program, educators have adopted a "less discipline, more acceptance"
philosophy, said Joan Keiran, program coordinator, teacher, and counselor. During orientation, teachers ask students to identify what they need from their classmates and instructors in order to feel comfortable as part of the group. This list is used to create classroom guidelines, which typically include expectations such as "Be respectful" and "Be kind." When students do not meet class expectations, staff members do not impose punishments. Their relatively lenient policy reflects the program's commitment to treating all students as adults and allowing them to learn from missteps on their own, said Keiran. Similarly, at GAP, teachers deal with infractions flexibly. Instructors and counselors often find that the disruptive behaviors of younger students stem from challenges outside the classroom. As the first step in an intervention, they try talking with the student in order to identify the source of the problem and then refer students to the program's social worker for further support.

In contrast, some of the instructors at VRABE take a "tough love" approach to working with youth. "I think there can sometimes be too much nurturing, which doesn't work with a lot of kids. Sometimes they need to be held to higher standards," said Howard. Holding students accountable for their actions means that VRABE staff members carefully review their policies with younger students participating in transition classes as part of a high school credit completion program, while teachers of their adult transition program dedicate much less time to discussing these issues. Younger students know the consequences for inappropriate actions, with suspension and loss of credit as two possible repercussions for poor behavior.

When different programs adopt such varied approaches to classroom management even as they all achieve high retention and graduation rates, one might infer that there is no single right way to manage behaviors in college transition classrooms. Each of the interviewees acknowledged that managing classroom behaviors can be difficult, and in all cases, figuring out what works best for their students has required a great deal of work and reflection.

How can educators engage younger and older students alike through the curriculum?

In interviews with 23 ABE practitioners in 20 states, Hayes (1999) found that educators rarely mentioned curriculum modification as a way to engage increasing numbers of youth in their programs. Perin and colleagues (2006) also found that ABE programs tended to assign older and younger students the same assignments. Keiran, of the Success Program, understands this perspective. She has found that a curriculum that is focused heavily on academic skill-building and that works effectively with older students is also successful with younger learners.

However, some program coordinators in this study proposed that educators should consider the interests of young students when making curriculum decisions. In the youth-based transitions class at VRABE, a typical curriculum might involve guest speakers, portfolio development, and detailed discussions about long-range planning, in addition to academic skill building. Such activities are less important for adults in the adult transition program, said Howard, because older students in her program want to focus exclusively on academics. "Whatever interferes with class time, they are unhappy with. They want math, they want English, and they want to do well on the Accuplacer," she said.

At GAP, educators have also incorporated goal-setting into their curriculum, but unlike the experience at VRABE, these instructors have found that adults are more receptive to career planning discussions than younger students. "The young people need goal-setting activities more, but they are a much harder sell because in their minds, this isn't an academic skill. They don't necessarily have the maturity to see what we are trying to accomplish, where the older person does see it and has a better informed goal pattern," said Magyar. GAP instructors incorporate goal-setting activities into the content subjects of reading, writing, and math.

At The Tutorial Center, instructors appeal to the interests of younger students by tapping into their real-life experiences. Teachers incorporate activities tied to modern technology (such as cell phone billing exercises) and refer to social trends that the students themselves observe and participate in. Similar strategies have been identified in the ABE literature. For example, when staff at the Metropolitan Alliance for Adult Learning adopted the Youth Cultural Competence curriculum (which incorporates popular culture and interests of youth such as music and movies into learning activities), they experienced increases in retention rates from 39% to 95% (Imel, 2003). While there is no experimental evidence definitively proving that it was the curriculum changes that caused the improvement, program educators did credit their success to this youth-focused approach.

Although the programs in this study employ different strategies to engage older and younger learners in the classroom, they are similar in that they each respond to what their respective students seem to want and need.

What are the counseling needs of younger students?

In their qualitative interviews with staff and students at five urban adult education programs, Flugman and colleagues (2003) found that successful programs tend to have a strong counseling component, with at least one case manager to address problems of chronic absenteeism and coordinate services. Interviewees in this current study agreed. While older and younger students tend to confront similar situational barriers (e.g. transportation, childcare, employment), adults are more likely to have a support system in place, whereas younger students may need additional help connecting with services, said Glade of The Tutorial Center. While each of the four programs in this study offer counseling services to all students, interviewees noted that counselors may need to spend more time helping younger students learn to manage the difficulties in their lives and referring them to appropriate support services.

How do some successful transition programs address attendance issues?

All of the programs in this study have a specific plan to address attendance issues (such as calling students after even one absence and monitoring attendance on a weekly basis), but two of the programs employ strategies developed with youth in mind. Learning that student phone numbers, particularly those of younger students, change regularly, GAP staff members verify numbers on a weekly basis. At The Tutorial Center, educators have found that text-messaging is an effective way to reach out to younger students regarding absences.
What are the qualifications of effective teachers of older and younger transitions students?

There was little consensus among practitioners regarding the types of educators who are best prepared to teach older and younger transition students. At The Success Program and The Tutorial Center, coordinators hire and recruit experienced educators with a firm understanding of both the content area subjects and the adult education population in general. "Working with youth is not essential for hiring. It is a plus," said Glade of The Tutorial Center. "I am more particularly looking for someone who has experience working with people who have lower skills and motivation and guiding them to success." He has found that the strategies that these educators use are equally effective with older and younger students.

For other programs, experience working with younger students is more important to the hiring decision. Nearly every teacher at GAP works both at the local high school and community college. At VRABE, Howard looks for different sets of skills when hiring teachers for the adult transition program and for the youth-based high school credit completion class. While she seeks college faculty to work with adults, she needs a teacher who is "enterprising, creative, flexible, and not blown away by anything that happens in the classroom" for her youth-based class. She often looks for individuals who have worked in the private sector and have experience "thinking on their feet" or those who have worked in youth-service agencies.

Should educators apply adult learning theories to their work with younger students?

In a case study of four ABE programs, Perin and colleagues (2006) found that teachers tended to treat younger and older students differently. Such differentiation, according to these researchers, is problematic. Instead, ABE programs that apply adult learning theory in their work with all students are the ones that successfully engage, retain, and educate younger students (Flugman et al., 2003).

Directors of the three mixed-age programs (The Success Program, GAP, and The Tutorial Center) agreed that application of adult learning theory was important to their success. "Teachers need to have a clear understanding of adult education theory since the traditional education practices tend not to work well with GED/ESOL transition students," said Keiran, who applies Malcolm Knowles' principles of andragogy (i.e. recognizing adults as self-directing, incorporating student experiences into teaching and learning; providing students with learner control). While interviewees acknowledged that younger students may have different life experiences and reasons for enrollment, they, too, noted the importance of treating all college transition students as adults regardless of age.

Should transition programs mix or segregate students by age?

Researchers have repeatedly found that mixed-age classrooms offer benefits to older and younger students alike (Elder, 1967; Darkenwald & Novak, 1997). In his landmark study of mixed-age continuing education classrooms, Elder (1967) found that adult students encouraged more appropriate behaviors in younger students, particularly when the following conditions were met: all students were engaged in the same educational activity; the proportion of adults and younger students were approximately equal; and students had similar cognitive abilities. More recently, in a study of 44 randomly selected community college classrooms, Darkenwald and Novak (1997) found that younger students enrolled in classes made up predominantly of adults earned higher grades than students in classes composed mostly of traditional-aged college students.

Interviewees in this study identified several benefits of mixed-age classrooms. First, older students tend to serve as positive mentors for younger learners. According to Keiran, when younger students struggle with attendance, older students in the cohort encourage them by having open conversations about the hardships they have faced without college credentials. By sharing their life experiences and providing encouragement, adults seem to play a role in helping younger students persist with their studies and develop a deeper understanding of the importance of college.

Younger students are not the only beneficiaries of mixed-age classrooms, however. Adults benefit not only from sharing their life experiences, but also from collaboration with tech-savvy youth. "In math class, the older students have a tremendous issue with the use of graphic calculators. The young people know how to use these calculators, so the younger students play a vital role in teaching themselves and others," said Jones of GAP.

According to Magyar, also of GAP, mixed-age classrooms are also beneficial because they prepare students for the real world. "By having this mixture, we are really showing students that this is the real-world environment. Virtually every community college has these mixtures of age in their classrooms, so it is something that reflects real life." Heterogeneous classrooms also reflect the modern workplace, where promotions are increasingly based more heavily on performance than seniority and employees of all ages collaborate in teams (Dirkx, 1997).

To capitalize on the strengths of mixed-age classrooms, some programs purposefully pair older and younger students during cooperative activities. At both The Success Program and The Tutorial Center, age is one of the variables educators use in pairing students. "It is a conscious decision to try to have there be an adult role model in the group available for the younger students," said Glade.

However, the track record of mixed-age cohorts is not uniformly positive. Advocates of age-segregated ABE classes, for example, argue that the presence of younger students, particularly if they are disruptive, can lead to adults withdrawing from programs (Dirkx, 2003; Hayes, 1999). This is precisely the situation that VRABE faced when they decided to combine the youth-based college transition class with the adult group. VRABE had anticipated that the two groups would benefit from each other. However, younger students failed to take the program seriously and some older students had no tolerance for their disruptive behavior. Despite having counselors to support both age groups, many older students withdrew from this historically successful program.

One important difference between VRABE's mixed-age experience and those of the three other programs is that VRABE's younger students were enrolled in a high school credit completion course and were required to take the transition class as one of their graduation requirements. In contrast, students in the other programs had elected to enroll in a college transition or diploma plus program. Nonetheless, VRABE's experience is reflective of the challenges that can occur in
mixed-age classrooms.

**Conclusion**

While all four programs have been successful in graduating transition students and preparing them for postsecondary opportunities, they each approach their work with youth and adults somewhat differently. It is not clear whether stricter rules or more lenient policies better serve young transition students, or if a traditional academic curriculum better engages youth than one supplemented by guest speakers and popular culture. Additional research is needed to determine the influence of each of the strategies used by transition programs to engage and educate younger and older students alike. Interviewees did agree that effectively working with students of all ages requires thoughtful reflection and responsiveness to the specific needs of younger and older students in their respective classrooms.

**Practitioner Recommendations**

Jack Glade, executive director of The Tutorial Center, recommends the following websites to his staff working with young adults.

**Successful Young Adult Development** - This report, submitted to the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation in 2004, identifies numerous indicators of young adult success.

**MIT’s Young Adult Development Project** - Rae Simpson, Program Director for Parenting Education and Research at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, has distilled and summarized research on the changes and brain development of adolescents and young adults.

**References**


Imel, S. (2003). Youth in adult basic and literacy education programs. Columbus, OH: ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult Career and Vocational Education. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED478949)

