

Meeting the Needs of the
**PART-TIME
COLLEGE
STUDENT**

By Lyn Bartlett

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The face of American higher education is changing. Enrollment of part-time, nontraditional students has risen dramatically in recent years. In the U.S., between 1970 and 1983, the proportion of part-time undergraduates increased from 28 to nearly 40 percent.¹ More than 23 million adults participated in more than 43 million courses in the year ending May 1984. Stated another way, about 14 percent, or one in seven, of the nation's adult population participated in part-time education.² More than one-fifth (21 percent) of the courses were taken for credit.

The terms "part time," "nontraditional," "adult and/or continuing education," are used interchangeably to describe students who are older than the traditional, full-time college student, that is, 18 to 24 years of age. Though there are exceptions, the typical part-time, nontraditional student is between the ages of 25 and 54.³

Who Are These Students?

Fifty-five percent are women. Half are under 35 years of age, with the largest concentration in the 25- to 34-year-old range. Whites are nearly twice as likely to study as blacks or Hispanics. Nearly all (92 percent) have completed high school (compared with 73 percent of the general adult population). More than 80 percent are employed, and nearly half (46 percent) have annual family incomes of \$30,000 or more.⁴

Lyn Bartlett is currently a doctoral student in higher and adult education at the University of Maryland, College Park, Maryland. He is also employed part-time at Columbia Union College, Takoma Park, Maryland, as an admissions counselor and adjunct teacher for the Adult Evening Program. Mr. Bartlett brings to his writing a background in academy administration and teaching of part-time college students at public institutions in Australia.

Like other institutions, Adventist colleges have also had an influx of part-time, nontraditional students. A telephone survey revealed a kaleidoscope of patterns, needs, and programs. However, more than half of North American SDA colleges provide no separate educational programs for part-time, nontraditional students. These students must enter the traditional full-time college program.

A number of Adventist colleges expressed their interest in establishing a nontraditional program but cited the restrictions of current funding. Some had surveyed their

Adventist and non-Adventist communities to plan for adult and/or continuing education programs in the future. One school lamented the fact that their formerly flourishing program is now considerably diminished due to changes in leadership and, more importantly, funding.

Both Andrews and Loma Linda universities operate divisions of continuing and extension education that have an impact on numerous other Adventist campuses throughout the world.

A Look at Several Approaches

Programs at three Adventist colleges provide some insight into the typical needs of part-time, nontraditional students. Southwestern Adventist College has some 125 students (about 2 percent non-Adventist) pursuing degrees by independent study. These students must attend an initial 10-day seminar on campus and return once each year thereafter for a three-day period.

Atlantic Union College operates a dual program with some 100 students attending continuing education classes during the week and an adult evening program of some 60 students (about 50 percent non-Adventist). The latter group studies off-campus but comes to the college for two weeks twice a year, in January and July.

Columbia Union College operates the largest adult program of the Adventist colleges in North America. Located in an urban center, it has a part-time, nontraditional enrollment approaching 300 students. Approximately 80 percent are non-Adventists.

At the spring 1987 commencement, 75 students received a Bachelor of Science degree in one of three degree programs available. In addition, the college offers an evening B.S. program in nursing for regis-

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tered nurses desiring to complete their four-year degree. CUC also has an external degree program with more than 120 students enrolled (most of whom are parttime).

What Are These Students Like?

Descriptions of both traditional and nontraditional students tend to suffer from stereotypes. Typically, the full-time, 18- to 24-year-old student is portrayed as single, carefree, unburdened by either career or family, and thus, able to balance a rigorous academic and social life. The part-time, nontraditional student is considered less academically astute, burdened by career and family, and less involved in the pursuit of knowledge or campus life.

In reality, the major differences that separate the traditional from the nontraditional student center on career and family commitments. Other perceived differences do not hold up under scrutiny.

In fact, in its analysis of part-time undergraduates, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching concluded that "contrary to conventional wisdom, most part-time students have clear goals, are serious in their work, and perform well in their studies."⁵ The same study found that part-time students report a slightly *higher* cumulative grade-point average than full-time students.

What Do Part-Time Students Need?

Colleges need to study carefully the needs and preferences of this expanding group of learners. Part-time, nontraditional students challenge many traditional values of higher education. As adults, they bring to the classroom a maturity and experience not yet possible to the traditional student. Writing in the *Journal of Teacher Education*, Backus comments that she has

found "non-traditional adult students to be able to set their goals and go far beyond the requirements I would have set, and they report high personal and professional satisfaction with the learning achieved."⁶

At the same time, Apps maintains that adult learners may need reassurance to offset their fear of failure in both the social environment and educational expectations of the classroom.⁷

The telephone survey of Adventist colleges operating nontraditional programs revealed similar findings to those of the national study. Part-time students are, in the main, mature adults with settled careers and families. The majority are professionals who, for a variety of reasons, have decided to complete the college educations that eluded them previously. They tend to be busy people with an established social network. In many cases adult students have little time for or interest in the religious structure that is so necessary for the full-time student.

Providing a Christian Aura

Certainly, the college experience consists of more than books, study, and academic performance. Adventist higher education, in particular, has a campus aura—that pervading Christian atmosphere that has permeated so many full-time students of the past with the spirit of Christ and the Adventist mission.

Vespers, weeks of prayer, clubs, banquets, class and dormitory activities—all are considered an integral part of the holistic education for a traditional Adventist college student. In thus integrating faith and learning the Adventist schema has provided an environment that combines career and preparation for a life of Christian commitment.

How can Adventist colleges pro-

vide a well-rounded Christian education to students who are on campus only for brief periods (each day, week, or month), or who seldom come to the campus at all (external degree enrollees)? How can such students gain the benefits available to those who attend on a full-time basis?

Adult learners are busy people. Colleges that offer programs for these students have found so little interest in events such as faculty-student picnics and Christmas parties, that some events have had to be cancelled. At one college, where adult evening students come to the campus twice each year, worship attendance, recreation, and other activities are classified as optional.

One should not conclude from this that part-time students do not need, or value, extracurricular activities, either spiritual or secular. Rather, the needs of part-time, nontraditional students are somewhat different from those of the full-time, traditional student.

These needs relate to the learning process and its environment. In essence, the part-time, nontraditional student returns to college to earn a degree for two main reasons: career advancement and/or personal fulfillment. The decision to resume study usually involves considerable personal sacrifice of time, energy, and money. Consequently, part-time students demand maximum return for their money.

A common adage in adult education circles says, "Adult students vote with their feet." If the faculty or program is not to their liking, they walk out. Therefore, these students tend to look for a degree program that has certain characteristics. These include the following:

- a packaged format (e.g., one night a week for 18 months)
- a structured course content
- faculty who understand the needs of the adult learner
- a supportive administrative staff
- reasonable tuition rates
- easy access to facilities such as parking, canteen, bookstore, and library
- small classes (between 15 and

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5. What view of man inspired the principal author, James Madison?

6. What is the relationship between the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution?

7. What is the significance of having a *written* Constitution?

8. How might one relate to the relative youth of our nation as compared with other western and eastern countries?

9. What makes the Constitution a "living" document that changes through time?

10. What useful insights may be gained by comparing the U.S. Constitution with other written or unwritten codes of government?

11. Does it matter that the Philadelphia Convention violated its mandate and replaced what it was simply asked to revise?

12. Why does the well-being of the republic depend on its citizens' commitment to civic virtue?

As we struggle with these and other questions, the Bicentennial can lead us back to civics. To the extent that this happens, John Adams' lament that "more people love liberty than understand it" need not apply to SDA students. □

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25 students) to encourage networking and maximum involvement.

In my work with nontraditional college students, I have been able to make some comparisons between a small American Adventist college and a large Australian state institution. Essentially the difference is one of basic philosophy and statement of purpose. Whereas the state educates for the tangible, natural world, Adventist higher education seeks to go beyond—to educate for the supernatural domain. The Adventist college must confront every student with the story of a God who is Creator, Saviour, and soon-coming King. In so doing, Adventist schools help

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their students understand how Christian ethics relate to their whole life.

Achieving Integration

But this integration, this confrontation often occurs outside class time—in worships, church services, weeks of prayer, and student missionary projects. How can the Adventist college share this message with its entire student body when some of its students do not participate in traditional religious activities?

To answer this question, we need to look at other positive characteristics of an Adventist college. Adventist institutions of higher learning possess two unique qualities that work for any student category: smallness and a pervading principle of caring concern. This is demonstrated by the instructor who provides a home telephone number along with the office number. It is shown by the director of continuing education who remembers the names and problems of enrollees in his or her program. It is seen by the students when they are treated as individuals by the accounting department, the records office, the bookstore, and the library.

Non-Adventist part-time students repeatedly talk about a positive and renewed religious experience as a direct result of the influence by faculty and departmental staff. I have witnessed the delight on students' faces when the president stops by unexpectedly at their class for a few minutes. I have observed the calm that pervades a class as the instructor offers prayer before an examination.

Inherent Dangers

Yet there is inherent danger in Adventist colleges and universities' catering to the part-time nontraditional student. This risk centers on the danger of compromise. Many public and private institutions have seen part-time students as the solution to their current enrollment and financial predicaments. Indeed, many colleges have survived only because they have entered this new educational market.

Adventist higher education must avoid the temptation to view part-time students simply as a budgetary windfall. Unless nontraditional students can be integrated into the total evangelistic mission of the school, then such programs have no place in the Adventist system of education. To view part-time students in terms of their contribution to balancing the budget is to eventually jeopardize all programs on campus.

Nevertheless, the part-time student phenomenon offers more positives than negatives. At a time of dwindling full-time, traditional enrollments, such students are the wave of the future. If Adventist colleges plan wisely, analyzing the needs of potential students and integrating the Christian dimension into every area of the curriculum, they will have seized an opportunity that is too good to miss. □

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