Returning to Learn: Research and the Prodigal Student

Emily Ford
Portland State University, forder@pdx.edu

Meredith G. Farkas
Portland State University, meredith.farkas@pcc.edu

Molly Blalock-Koral
Portland State University, mgun2@pdx.edu

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Abstract

Returning students - those with a significant lapse in time during their formal education - make up a large and growing percentage of the student population at Portland State University (PSU). Over 40% of PSU undergraduates are over 26 years of age and 21% of graduate students over 39. Given returning students’ experiences in the work force, motivations for learning, and the lapse of time since conducting academic research, returning students may approach research in higher education very differently than traditional students. Despite the increasing numbers of returning students in higher education, very little research has been conducted regarding these students’ research habits and challenges. The goals of this research are to describe returning students’ research habits and to identify potential improvements to library services and instruction for returning students at PSU.

About Portland State

- Urban public University in Portland, Oregon
- Oregon’s largest university with over 29,000 students
- Diverse student body
- Approximately 13% of BA graduates entered Portland State as transfers
- 45% of students are enrolled part-time
- Large population of adult learners
- Over 40% of undergraduates are over 26 years old
- 21% of graduate students are over 40 and over

A Gap in the Literature

The education literature has shown that returning students have different experiences, needs and practices than traditional students. Over the past decade, libraries and other units in higher education have done significant investigation of the research habits of traditional 18-22 year-old student. However, studies on the research habits of returning students, and studies regarding returning students in general, are rare, despite this growing population in all U.S. institutions of higher learning.

First Impressions

Based on the data already collected but without complete analysis, our initial impressions show that returning students do have unique challenges and experiences in regards to research.