Coffee as a Retention Tool?

Something as simple as a cup of coffee can determine whether a student stays in school or drops out. “Coffee or a snack may seem like a small thing to those who cannot imagine a student who has no time to eat dinner after her or his full-time job and before a night class,” wrote Deborah Kilgore in 2003. But to adult students, a simple kindness may become the very lifeline that keeps them progressing toward their degrees.

Six staff members from Nova Southeastern University’s student educational centers turned Kilgore’s advice into a set of initiatives to retain adult and nontraditional students. They reported on “A Coffee Approach” at the NASPA conference for student affairs administrators held in Orlando in March 2013.

On the panel were assistant directors Corey Campbell in Palm Beach, Sholondo Campbell in Fort Myers, Cathy O’Brien in Jacksonville, Joseph Pokraka in Miami, Lorenza Vandiver in Orlando and Sheena Zawacki in Tampa.

Stats on adult learners

Trends show that adult or nontraditional learners over age 25 are expected to make up 40% of total college enrollment by the year 2018. Some say the number of nontraditional students is actually much higher; what about a 19-year-old who’s a parent and working two jobs?

Some eight million students between the ages of 25 and 34—or about 21% of all students—quit school without a degree. Co-curricular activities, which are often the glue that prevents traditional students from dropping out, don’t help adult students whose priorities are work, family and earning the degree.

Students at the Florida school’s student educational centers are no different, said Sholondo Campbell. They’ve come from somewhere else to get to a center. Their entry to college has been delayed by at least one year. They have dependents and often are single parents. Most work full-time.

Some 38% are financially independent. They attend school part-time while balancing multiple roles so their identity as “student” is not a priority for them.

Adult students are people in transition. Many of them feel they don’t matter. Others are conflicted with dependence and shifting roles.

The key to changing that attitude is to foster an inclusive campus community by “raising the BAR” of Belonging, Affinity and Retention, said the panel. Programs, activities and assignments should allow all students to get involved and to feel important.

“Transformative learning” can help students develop a sense that they matter and that they are important. The theory refers to a change in one’s frame of reference, said Zawacki. It has academic and curricular implications. How can we develop students’ autonomous thinking?

Practical and workforce learning opportunities can be applicable to adult learners, who appreciate assignments and opportunities that are related to their goal.

Student affairs can develop and support initiatives and co-curricular activities that develop skills that can be applied to students’ lives, such as info on financial assis-