

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 1, 2012

Why Worry About Adults In The Classroom?

By [Richard Novak](#)
Associate Vice President for Continuing
Studies and Distance Learning,
Rutgers University

The question often arises in higher education circles, “why should we worry about accommodating adult students in the college classroom?” The answers are as varied as there are different types of higher education institutions.

Some institutions see this population as a target of opportunity to address budget shortfalls or to offset reductions in state funding. Some are trying to expand their institutional mission as the traditional college-age population shrinks while other institutions have as their mission the desire to serve non-traditional adult students. Whatever the reason, there is increased competition for this market segment of potential college students. This actually can be a positive development for everyone, irrespective of their age and role in life.

Studies in the 1990s demonstrated unequivocally the potential benefit of having more adults in the college classroom. In short, findings from both the

community college setting and traditional four-year university revealed that all students, regardless of age, performed better academically, as measured by end of course grade, in an adult-dominated college classroom. One explanation for this positive development is related to the sociological phenomena known as role theory and social norming. Briefly stated, adults have many roles that they juggle in their adult life. Adults are often consumed by their employment and career advancement issues, family care—with both dependent children and dependent elderly parents—as well as other roles, such as volunteer. The role of college student is one among many of their competing roles and it typically is not the most important role.

Because adults must find time in a busy schedule, with many priorities, to fulfill the role of student, they take on this role with a level of seriousness, persistence and integrity that may be missing from pre-adult or traditional age



PHOTO BY MAX KLINGENSMITH

Adults are more than seat-fillers; their dedication inspires their classes to perform better.

college students. Their social norms of working hard, completing assignments, handing work in on time, not cheating on assignments or exams—all of these norms are salutary for a more positively enrichment classroom environment. As a result, all students in the class perform better. In large scale studies, as measured by end of

course grades, predominantly adult classes performed nearly a full grade higher on average than classes that were predominantly traditional age students.

So, while some may see adult students as a way to increase the bottom line, those who are committed to lifelong learning should instead focus

on the powerful tangible benefits for all students that come from having adults in the college classroom. For lifelong learning to be successful—truly lifelong and truly about learning—changes need to occur in how things happen in today’s college classroom. Research shows that adults can help investigate those changes.



AUTHOR PROFILE *Current Position and Past Experience*

Richard Novak has been the Associate Vice President for Continuing Studies and Distance

Learning at Rutgers University since 1991. He has also served as an adjunct graduate faculty member for the Rutgers School of Management and Labor Relations as well as in the university’s Graduate School of Education. Novak has also held the role of Director of Special Projects in Rutgers Office of Academic Affairs since 2009. He established and directs the Center for Online & Hybrid Learning and Instructional Technologies (COHLIT) at Rutgers.

Novak was the President of the University Professional Continuing Education Association (UPCEA) in 2007-2008. He served as the Regional Chair for the Mid-Atlantic Region of UPCEA in 2002-2003. He served as a member of the Board of Directors for UPCEA from 2003-2009.