DEFICIT AND RESILIENCE PERSPECTIVES ON PERFORMANCE AND CAMPUS COMFORT OF ADULT STUDENTS

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The objectives of this research were to test deficit and resilience models of adult students' experiences by: 1) determining the relative influence of chronological age and age stress on their academic performance and campus comfort; and 2) considering earlier educational experiences and social support in relation to their performance and campus comfort. Data were analyzed from 138 questionnaires completed by students 25 years of age or over. Age was positively related to performance; age stress was negatively associated with campus comfort and independent of age. There was no support for the deficit model of earlier educational experiences and later performance. Only certain types of support predicted campus comfort. Efforts to address age stress should be extended to the youngest adult students and take into account they are not immune to its discomfort.

Introduction
Adult students are the most rapidly growing group in colleges and universities even though “one residual bias still tolerated, albeit quietly, ...” is that directed against mature students (Quinnan, 1997, p. 3). An objective of this research was the investigation of deficit and resilience perspectives in relation to adult, nontraditional college students' academic performance and campus comfort. The concept of adult student is so closely tied to age that it immediately raises questions about attributions to students that are derived from age and its relationship to performance in the role of student. Literature about adult students informed the selection of variables to test deficit and resilience perspectives of academic performance and campus comfort. Models to predict academic performance and campus comfort included earlier educational experiences, lifestyle characteristics reflected in off-campus roles (e.g., family and work),

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support from persons in these roles, age stress, study skills stress, and age.

The Deficit Perspective

We observed two themes in the literature about the characteristics and experiences attributed to nontraditional students which guided our research. The first theme is one of vulnerability and deficits and portrays academic experiences of adult students as fraught with threats, some of which are age-related, that may hinder performance and may encourage creation of enhanced or special services.

The deficit model is underscored by the view that “...Discussions about the role of adult students in higher education tend to stress their supposed needs rather than the potential benefits they can bring” (Richardson & King, 1998, p. 1). Adult students have been described as a group for “whom the experience of higher education would be inherently problematic” (Richardson & King, 1998, p. 2).

Some earlier literature contributing to the deficit perspective, in part, was based on the presumed negative effects of age on learning capacity (McGovern, 1993). Research about age-related deficits in cognitive performance with implications for adult students, for example, has included among others diminished learning capacity, slower work speed, less adaptability, less retentive capacity, and poor study skills (Carlan, 2001).

Negative stereotypes surrounding the potential for adult students to achieve academic success remain (Carlan, 2001). Adult students may hold negative age-linked attributions of poor performance and diminished expectations for academic persistence and attainment for themselves and their peers (Richardson & King, 1998).

Stereotypes of age present an exaggerated picture of the importance of a few characteristics (Palmore, 2001). If an individual performs a role initially thought more appropriate for a different age group, then characteristics associated with age that may be linked with difficulty in engaging in the role may be exaggerated in importance. Richardson and King (1998) observed that with all of the negative stereotypes of adult students held by others it is not surprising that they would experience stress attributable to their age. Indeed, new or returning adult students identified age, traditional-age students, faculty, study skills, and integration among their concerns (Harrison, 2000). Deficient study skills and age-related deficits in intellectual capacities necessary to perform well in higher education are examples of stereotypes of adult students that are largely unfounded but persist despite research evidence to the contrary (Richardson & King, 1998). The stereotypes are sustained by “fundamental views about the adverse effects of aging that are held in Western society ...” (King & Richardson, 1998, p. 9). These stereotypes may marginalize adult students. In this research we consider stress attributed to age and study skills in relation to academic performance and campus comfort.

The deficit perspective extends beyond cognitive impairments to lifestyle barriers that may impede academic attainment such as marital and family obligations, demands of employment, or work-family conflict. Mercer (1992) described demands from
family, work, and community as situational barriers to educational attain- ment. Gigliotti and Huff (1995) found financial strains, work conflicts, and university-related strains were primary stressors of adult students.

Multiple roles, of course, are features that differentiate lives of adult students from those of their younger peers. Family, work, and community obligations of adult students are thought to define their needs and academic experiences (Fairchild, 2003). Adult students, for example, are more often married or separated, employed full time, and have children (Kasworm, 2003). Nontraditional college students also have more time and role conflicts than do traditional students (Morris, Brooks, & May, 2003). In this research we considered the off-campus roles of adult students in relation to performance and campus comfort.

Just as their off-campus obligations and activities differ, traditional-age and adult students’ on-campus experiences vary. Adult students, for example, spend less time on campus, are less involved in campus organizations, and participate more in formal groups that are not associated with the academic institution (Bradley & Graham, 2000). In general, adult students have less sustained contact with many aspects of the campus.

Compared to their younger peers, adult students more often attend two-year or less schools or colleges prior to enrollment at a four year institution (Kasworm, 2003). Some community colleges where adult students may begin or re-renter an academic program struggle with their image (Barry & Barry, 1992). Dziech and Vilter (1992) refer to tension between two and four year institutions, the struggle for stature on the part of the former, and sometimes the arrogance of baccalaureate institutions. Community colleges have been described as “prisoners of elitism” as they may try to establish effective transfer procedures and relationships with four-year colleges and universities (Barry & Barry, 1992). These views may contribute to the “negative stereotype that transfer students are inferior and unprepared …; it becomes apparent that adult students beginning at community colleges and transferring to senior colleges have many obstacles to overcome in the pursuit of success” (Carlan, 2001, p. 169). In this research, we considered whether type of college attended earlier influenced performance and campus comfort at a large university.

Part-time and non-sequential enrollment also characterize attendance patterns of adult students who are more often first generation college students. The more erratic attendance of adult students means they will less often have the advantage of moving through their academic career with an age cohort (Fairchild, 2003). Lifestyle characteristics may have shaped prior academic choices, some of which may affect later academic performance. Decisions about the type of college to attend, its location, and the extent of contact with it may be associated with students’ off-campus family, work, and community demands. We investigated attendance patterns in relation to academic performance and campus comfort.

The Resilience Perspective

In contrast to the deficit perspective for
older students, a model of resilience focuses on assets and strengths drawn from maturity. This perspective is based on research indicating that many age deficits are minimal if they exist at all or may be compensated for, that the social and family environment of adult students may not be a barrier and, indeed, may be a source of support, and that greater clarification of goals may come with maturity (Carlan, 2001). A hallmark of the resilience model would be persistence even in the presence of great difficulties in institutional settings that are rarely designed to address needs of adult students (Sandler, 2000).

A resilience model has support from conclusions of researchers who suggest that adult students are self-directed learners who bring more goals and commitment to the classroom (Carlan, 2001). Adult students may have different learning styles or attitudes toward learning than those of younger students. An outcome of their learning styles and different views of learning is that adult students earn better grades in college courses than traditional age students and may have a positive effect on attainments of younger students.

Although the multiple roles of adult students may foster strain and conflict, the social ties they represent may be a source of support to succeed in a new off-time undertaking. Indeed, retention and achievement of adult students are positively associated with supportive family members and friends (Harrison, 2000). Brinkerhoff (2001) also observed the contribution of support from others to adult students’ success in their undergraduate programs. Faculty-student interaction, however, was supportive for nontradition-
al students (Fairchild, 2003). Some of these attributes of adult learners may affect their campus comfort and well-being. We investigated whether support received from family, peers, and coworkers was associated with performance and campus comfort.

In summary, in this research we examined: 1) the contribution of prior educational experiences, multiple roles, and social support to academic performance and campus comfort of adult students; 2) and studied whether students who managed to maintain low age and study skill stress performed better and reported greater campus comfort.

Procedures
Sample Selection
We obtained a list of names and addresses of students 25 years of age or over who currently attended a Midwestern university. Respondents were randomly selected, and 138 (33 percent) replied to a mail questionnaire about their lives as students. We did not send a follow-up letter to request participation from non-respondents.

The majority of respondents were female (about 55 percent). The age range for respondents was twenty-five to sixty-three years of age (x = 33, SD = 8.32). A little over half of respondents (about 52 percent) were married, and the second largest group was single individuals who comprised about 36 percent of the sample. Thirty-six percent of the sample had dependents.
Measures

Comfort and well-being. The researchers developed a measure of campus comfort from suggestions in the literature about aspects of the campus environment that might be less comfortable for adult than for traditional age students (Fairchild, 2003; Kasworm, 2003). The circumstances included comfort in class, with professors, with classmates, and using services and programs. Students indicated on a five point scale the extent to which they "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (5) with nine items about comfort on campus. Representative items were “I am comfortable in class”; “I feel comfortable working with my classmates”; “I was comfortable during orientation”; “My classes are geared toward my needs”; “My professors understand my needs and background”; “Younger students are welcoming”; “I am comfortable using campus services.” Nine items were summed so that a high score reflected greater levels of comfort or well-being ($\bar{x}= 32.54$, SD = 6.22; alpha = .85).

Academic performance. Academic performance was assessed by self-reported GPA ( $\bar{x}= 3.13$, SD = .54).

Educational experiences. The types of educational institutions students attended earlier, continuous-discontinuous enrollment, class level, and average number of credits taken were educational experiences used in the analyses.

Types of educational institutions attended were coded 1-5 and ranged from GED (1) to a four-year college or university (5). Thirty-two percent had attended a two-year college and 42 percent a four-year college or university. The remainder (26 percent) received their education at a level less than a two-year college (e.g., technical-specialized schools). The majority of students (70 percent) enrolled in sequential semesters (coded 1), and 30 percent attended college sporadically (coded 2). Average number of credits taken per semester was coded into five groups: 1 = 3-6 credits (18 percent); 2 = 7-11 credits (14 percent); 3 = 12-15 credits (47 percent); 4 = 16-18 credits (11 percent); and 5 = 19 and over (10 percent). Class level was used as a variable assessing educational experiences. Sixty-four percent of the respondents were seniors (coded 4), twenty percent juniors, eleven percent sophomores, and four percent freshmen (coded 1).

Support. Students indicated how much support (0 = no support to 5 = highest support) the following five groups gave to them in their academic career: family ( $\bar{x}= 4.07$, SD = 1.48); co-workers ( $\bar{x}= 4.58$, SD = 1.70); advisors ( $\bar{x}= 3.26$, SD = 1.57); professors ( $\bar{x}= 3.14$, SD = 1.40); and classmates ( $\bar{x}= 3.34$, SD = 1.55).

Study skill stress and age stress. Worry about adequacy of study skills among some new and returning adult students has been described as a difficulty in the literature (Harrison, 2000). Students rated the amount of stress their study skills caused them in regard to their educational attainment. Concerns of new and returning adult students about the influence of their age on their performance, relationships with traditional age students, faculty, and adjustment to the academic environment may be stressful (Fairchild, 2003; Harrison,
2000; Kasworm, 2003). Students rated the amount of stress their age caused them in their educational program. The scale ranged from “0 = no stress” to “10 = highest stress” ($\bar{x} = 4.99; SD = 2.46; \bar{x} = 3.82; SD = 2.59$, study skills and age stress, respectively).

**Results**

Correlations among the variables are shown in Table 1. Deficit and resilience models of academic performance and campus comfort were assessed using multiple regression.

**Multivariate Analyses of Academic Performance**

**Deficits and academic performance.** Two tests of potential deficits were used to predict GPA as a measure of adult students’ academic performance. In the first model, educational experiences that have been viewed as markers of vulnerability among adult students were included in separate regression analyses of academic performance and campus comfort. Four characteristics of students’ educational experiences including previous education (two or four year college or less), class level (freshman–senior), full time or part-time enrollment (average number of credits), and continuous vs. discontinuous enrollment were studied in relation to GPA. This model was not significant ($R^2 = .02$, $F = 1.81$, ns). These aspects of educational experience sometimes thought to alter the performance of adult students had no significant effect on the GPAs of the individuals studied.

Because concern about the quality of study skills has been suggested as a difficulty of adult students that may have a direct bearing on their performance in class work, perceived stress about study skills was included in a second model to explain GPA. Age stress, chronological age, and the four educational experience variables from the first analysis were also included. This model explained 23 percent of the variance in GPA (Table 2). Only study skill stress ($t = -3.44$, $p < .001$) and chronological age ($t = 3.24$, $p < .001$) were significantly related to GPA. In general, older students made better grades, but adult students with greater concerns about their study skills had poorer average grades. Stress attributed to age did not figure directly in student performance reflected in grades.

Age stress and stress about study skills were positively correlated ($r = .42$, $p < .001$), but only study skill stress had an independent effect on GPA. Age stress may have enhanced study skill stress and indirectly influenced GPA through concern about adequacy of skills necessary to perform the required academic work. Age stress was not related to any of the four academic experience variables studied, e.g., type of institution attended, full time–part time enrollment, continuous vs. discontinuous enrollment, and class level.

**A resilience model of academic performance.** A resilience model suggests that adult students may draw strength and receive support from their accumulated roles that positively influence their academic outcomes. We considered the
importance of support from significant others as predictors of academic performance of adult students. A regression analysis of five different sources of support and GPA revealed that support from advisors, classmates, coworkers, family, and professors did not alter the academic performance of adult students as reflected in their grades (R2 = .01, F = 1.25, ns; data available from authors). Students with greater support from a variety of sources did not receive better grades.

Models of Campus Comfort

Campus comfort represents an affective dimension of the adult student experience. To the degree that earlier educational experiences of nontraditional students may entail poorer preparation for a four-year college or university they may have a detrimental effect on comfort and feelings of well-being on campus.

Deficits and campus comfort. A multiple regression analysis indicated that academic experiences (i.e., level of prior education, average credits, class level, continuous-discontinuous enrollment), and GPA did not predict comfort on campus (R2 = .02, F = .02, ns, data available from authors). Comfort of adult students was independent of earlier educational experiences and performance.

A resilience model of campus comfort. To test the contribution of social support, age, and age stress to comfort, a regression analysis included the effects of support from family, co-workers, advisors, peers and professors, age, and age stress on comfort. These variables explained 31 percent of the variance in comfort on campus (Table 3). Age stress was the strongest predictor of campus comfort. Less stress attributed to age was associated with increased comfort (β = -.25). Among possible sources of support that might influence campus comfort, only support from professors increased comfort. Comfort was independent of chronological age suggesting that the oldest students negotiated the campus and its expectations with ease similar to that of their younger adult student peers.

Discussion and Implications

Rates of adult participation in education increased in the 1990s, and age-graded roles of student, workers, and retiree, became more blurred. Yet, age-related expectations continued to depress pursuit of education by adults at the close of the 20th century (Hamil-Luker & Uhlenberg, 2002). In our research we evaluated deficit and resilience models of academic performance and campus comfort of adult students who faced age-graded expectations and chose to pursue an undergraduate degree. The research did not support a deficit model of negative effects of adult students’ prior educational experiences.

Both academic performance and comfort on campus remained unthreatened by earlier educational experiences and role demands that might in some circumstances compromise academic achievement. Any disadvantages, for example, from preparation at lower level institutions or discontinuous attendance were overcome by adult students and had little effect on
their adaptation on a university campus.

An hypothesized resilience model of outcomes for adult students emphasizes the importance of support drawn from their involvement in multiple roles. Lower levels of support would be expected to affect comfort negatively. Despite generally positive correlations at the bivariate level between sources of support and comfort, in the multivariate analysis only support from professors fostered campus comfort and other sources seemed benign. Of all sources, certainly professors’ assistance to students would be closest to expectations for and demands of class work and academic performance. We did not observe the negative effects of contact with faculty for some students noted earlier.

This research began with questions about the importance of age and attendant barriers to the performance and well-being of adult students. Even though attitudes toward adult students have modified in recent decades, (Hamil-Luker & Uhlenberg, 2002) stereotyping of them as more marginal scholars persists (Carlan, 2001; Richardson & King, 1998). Feelings of age stress were a threat to adult students’ comfort on campus.

An important finding for practice is that age stress occurred independent of age. Any stereotypes and labeling attributable to age that resulted in age stress affected younger and older adult students comparably. Programs to address stress about age should be extended to the youngest adult students and take into account that they are not immune to its discomfort. Although data were not obtained across time, it may be that the strain of this deviant role begins with enrollment, diminishes little, and is sustained throughout the academic program. Moreover, comfort on campus in a variety of settings was eroded by stress attributed to age. Negative feelings about age diminished the ease with which adult students related to others and their environment and likely increased worry over study skills. Future research may need to identify multiple, specific stereotypes of aging that are linked with age stress and thwart well-being of both younger and older adult students.

Several researchers have identified an initial lack of confidence of adult students that may be attributed to their assumptions about disadvantages or poorer preparation than younger peers who may have participated in a continuous educational experience (Ross-Gordon, 2003), and this is an area in which to target change. A lack of confidence may be juxtaposed to the profile of adult students as self-directed, goal-oriented, competitive and assertive. Adult students may persist and achieve in the presence of disadvantages and challenges to their self-concept of ability.

In summary, the adult students studied performed well despite the level of discomfort they felt in various parts of their campus and classroom environment. Some students overcame less adequate educational backgrounds to achieve. Age stress, which probably is based, in part, on stereotypes of older students, made campus life less comfortable and is an area that may warrant programming to address inconsistencies between beliefs about adult students and their actual experiences.
## Table 1
Correlations Among Comfort, GPA, Education Experiences, Study Skills and Age Stress and Age

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*p < .05. **p < .01.
### Table 2
Multiple Regression of Educational Experiences, Age, Study Skill and Age Stress with Grade Point Average

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*Note. $R^2 = 23$*

### Table 3
Multiple Regression of Sources of Support, Age, and Age Stress with Campus Comfort

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*Note. $R^2 = 31$*
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