

Survey looks at experience of mid-life and older adults returning to graduate education

August 19 2011, By Jessica Martin

Americans are remaining in the workforce longer and many are changing or advancing their careers well past age 40.

“With this trend towards working longer, educational institutions have been trying to figure out their role in keeping up with the needs of our aging society,” says Nancy Morrow-Howell, PhD, the Ralph and Muriel Pumphrey Professor of Social Work at the Brown School at Washington University in St. Louis.

The Brown School decided to study the experiences of their students who came to get their MSW after the age of 40. The survey focuses on pathways to graduate school, their experience in the classroom as well as field, and their post-MSW careers.

“As part of our Next Move project, we surveyed our students over 40 from the past 10 years to find out if their efforts were worth it and if there was anything the school could do to improve the experience,” she says.

Overall, the findings were positive.

“We were looking for any negative experiences being non-traditionally aged students or negative experiences on the job market,” Morrow-Howell says.

“We found that people came, they did well, they went out and

accomplished their plans, they got into the careers they wanted and they looked very favorably at their experience.”

The survey revealed that more than half of the students returning to school over the age of 40 were switching careers to the social work field instead of advancing current social work careers.

Program development

While the students enjoyed their experience at the Brown School, survey respondents commented that the instructors and their classmates could have taken more advantage of their life and work experience.

The survey report suggests that teachers could be more creative in using previous experience in assignments and discussions. Further, the curriculum must help these students take advantage of skills that are transferring from the for-profit sector.

“The classroom will be more enriching for everybody if there are people of all ages,” Morrow-Howell says. “We should begin to see age as an important part of diversity as much as we see ethnicity and gender and sexual orientation as aspects of diversity.”

She notes that the survey results also are making the Brown School take a hard look at how to reach out to older students.

Other graduate programs

Morrow-Howell says that these results can be applied to other graduate programs, particularly in fields that may face labor shortages in the future, such as education, health and social services.

“Our findings show that older students can come to the classroom, they

can do well and they can do what they want to do when they're done," she says.

"I think the findings are particularly relevant to certain sectors of the economy. Some fields are going to have enough people in the labor force as younger folks are being trained and come into the job market, but some are going to be short on labor and those sectors are beginning to look at how to retain people longer. We see graduate education as a potential way to bring mid-life and older adults into the workforce."

Provided by Washington University in St. Louis

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