



# INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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## *Thinking About College?— An Invitation to Education for the Mature Woman*

In 1979, afraid and alone, a mature woman (wife, mother of two teenage boys, active community member) enrolled in Schoolcraft College. By her own description, she was "scared to death" but determined to enter college. In tandem with her acclimation to college life, she organized an informal network of mature women students. Members of this network found each other eager to share information, ideas, and possible solutions to campus and home experiences.

In 1985, the Women's Resource Center recognized the need to provide formal information and support for women who are returning to school, and created "Thinking About College?"

### **Program Outline**

"Thinking About College?" is presented prior to each semester. A packet of information is provided for each participant, including general college information and specifics of the day's program. Designed for participants to have a full day on campus, the program begins with the director of the Women's Resource Center welcoming participants and leading an icebreaker exercise that establishes relationships early in the day.

Participants write the questions and concerns they have about entering or re-entering college. The common concern, "I Don't Know What I Want To Be When I Grow Up," is addressed as the questions and concerns are collected. Participants are visibly relieved to know they are not alone in that concern. It is explained that a total career goal and academic program plan are not necessary prerequisites for beginning a college career. They are reassured, as they take their first classes, that students have a chance to explore other courses and programs in a variety of ways, such as through the use of the library, conversations, and the Career Planning and Placement Center. This formal and informal information-gathering often leads students to more specific career planning. Continuing contact with the counseling office and other support staff also affirms and confirms course selection and program planning for students.

In the next stage of the program, the collected questions and concerns are addressed both directly and indirectly by administrators and staff from the following departments: Admissions, Financial Aid, Registration, Counseling, Learning Assistant Center, and Child Care Center. The administrator or staff member describes the goal and function of her/his area. Printed materials, such as the college catalog, admissions packet, financial aid forms, and others are distributed so that each required form or program is individually discussed. Time is allotted to answer questions specific to each area.

A flow chart is distributed at the end of the morning session to reinforce the information. This simple visual tool shows the prospective student the steps to take to get from the Admission's Office to the first day of class.

The participants are then divided into small groups of 7-10 persons to tour the campus. Volunteer peer counselors from the Women's Resource Center provide information and support as they tour. The information-packed morning is balanced by the physical activity of the tour and the chance to process the morning's information during lunch. Members of the Women's Resource Center staff and volunteers, as well as faculty members who will be afternoon speakers, are seated with the participants at lunch. The vice president for student services is also present to welcome the participants to campus and describe the services of her office.

Following lunch, participants meet a panel of three women who survived the stage of "thinking about college" and have become successful college students. Each member of the "Re-entry Panel" tells her own story. One might speak of goals, fears, challenges. Another might share the reactions of her family to "Mom" going to school, the delights and the disappointments. Another might address a particularly helpful course or support service. Time is allowed for questions from the participants. The first-person accounts are very reassuring to the participants.

After a short break, the participants select a small group session to help them identify areas of interest in



the college curriculum. These small groups include: Liberal Arts, Business, Child Development, Academic Options, Para-medical Programs, Nursing, Technical Programs, and special grants from the Women's Resource Center. The sessions are led by faculty members from each discipline and are repeated so that each person can attend three of the eight small groups.

Following the small groups, a short concluding session is held with all the participants to review the day and invite any final questions. A short documentary video describing the programs and services of the Women's Resource Center and completion of evaluation forms concludes the day.

#### Follow-up

At approximately mid-semester, participants who have been admitted and registered receive a call from a Women's Resource Center volunteer or staff member to ascertain their progress. Any lingering questions and concerns are addressed or referrals made as appropriate.

Tracking of participants began in 1989. At that time, 79 persons attended one of three programs. Thirty-three percent were admitted and registered for classes. Through September, 1990, two programs were offered with 43 participants and 26 percent admitted and registered for fall semester.

#### Academic Performance

The 1989 participants showed excellent academic performance with 92 percent earning a GPA of 3.0 or above (28 percent earned a 3.0-3.5, and 64 percent earned a 3.5-4.0).

#### Support Services

Approximately eight weeks before the "Thinking About College?" program, a letter and survey were sent to each 1989 participant who was a current student. Forty percent of those contacted responded. Three 1989 participants volunteered for the 1990 Re-entry Panel, and a significant number of participants reported using campus support services. Fifty percent utilized the Learning Assistance Center and the Women's Resource Center; 36 percent utilized the Career Planning and Placement Center, and 29 percent the Financial Aid Office.

The "Thinking About College?" program begins a support process and provides a foundation for academic success for the participants. Explanation of the support services provides the resources for proactive intervention by the student should need arise.

We have discovered that mature women are a special population of students who provide the college with a wealth of valuable experiences and a very successful academic record.

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Suanne D. Roueche, Editor

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