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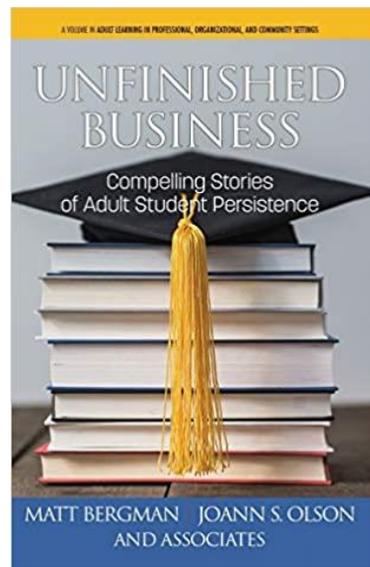
Bergman, M., Olson, J. S., & Associates. (2019). *Unfinished business: Compelling stories of adult student persistence*. Information Age Publishing.

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Is college worth it? Ask an environmental scientist, a Grammy-nominated recording artist, a diversity and inclusion manager, an immigrant and now naturalized U.S. citizen, or a Super Bowl champion, and you will hear a resounding “Yes!” They are all examples of successful “come-backers,” adult learners whose diverse higher education journeys are profiled in *Unfinished Business: Compelling Stories of Adult Student Persistence* by Matt Bergman, Joann S. Olson, and Associates. They represent just five of the 50 individuals (the “Associates”) whose personal, winding, and often decades-long paths to a college degree are included in this book. The brief narratives of these adult learners portray individuals who persevered and succeeded despite



formidable odds, fueled by their remarkable fortitude, resilience, and most importantly, fierce determination to do whatever was necessary to finally earn a baccalaureate diploma. As the profiles clearly demonstrate, “There really is no ‘typical’ adult degree-completion student” (p. 145). Every individual’s story is unique; some first entered college directly from high school and intermittently enrolled while others chose different paths to their initial college course. But the optimistic end result is the same. Through these diverse lenses, Bergman and Olson chronicle the life-changing impact of completing a baccalaureate degree, exploring the crucial questions, “Why do adult learners return to higher education?” and “Why do they persist?”

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The answers to these questions are especially timely and relevant in the current environment. Colleges and universities across the country increasingly are challenged by dwindling enrollments and seek to overcome the projected decline in high school graduates (Bransberger et al., 2020) by tapping into the pool of 36 million individuals in the United States who have some college but no degree (Shapiro et al., 2019). On an almost daily basis, higher education media feature articles or research studies highlighting the urgency to better serve the population of learners who are age 25 and above. Programs such as “Older Adults Are Heading to College for New Opportunities” (Cerre, 2021) and “I Need a Degree in Order to Move Forward: Why Some Adults Choose College” (Nadworney et al., 2019) have raised awareness of this imperative for a national audience.

Indeed, adult learners have become higher education’s “new ‘traditional’ student” (p. 1). Written in part as a testament to other potential come-backers that pursuing their deferred dream of a diploma is well worth the time and effort, Bergman and Olson purposefully center the book around the adult learners’ own stories because their impassioned words are far more powerful and convincing than objective research or statistics. In addition, the volume expresses the authors’ strong commitment “to help[ing] the academy, industry, and society as a whole understand the impact of adult learning programs that have helped transform these people’s lives and the impact that new and innovative approaches to serving working learners can have on the 21st century workforce” (p. 13). The authors adeptly achieve these objectives.

Faculty, staff, and administrators who have worked with adult learners and understand their complex educational trajectories will recognize familiar themes. Some of these themes appear as the titles of chapters two through six which highlight important motivators for adults with some college but no degree to return to higher education. Among these influential factors are: to provide for and serve as a role model for their family, to seek personal fulfillment, to pursue career advancement, to prove they can overcome barriers and beat the odds, and to rediscover their love of learning. Using this framework, Bergman and Olson associate each of the 50 portraits with the most pertinent stimulus although, in reality, the come-backers frequently returned to higher education based on multiple reasons.

The direct, candid voices of the 50 Associates differentiate this work from other volumes focused on higher education and the adult learner. They recount how life intervened, causing them initially to forego their dream of becoming a college graduate and then, often decades later, prompting their ultimate return to realize that goal. The titles of their individual accounts offer a glimpse into the stories of these transformed lives: “From Gangster to Graduate: The Untold Story of My Pursuit of a Dream,” “Comeback Student Athlete of the Year: From the Majors to Graduation,” “Grandma Goes to College,” “From Oil Changes to Influence,” “My 44-Year Journey to a College Degree,” “18 Months and 89 Credits,” “My Educational Journey: Third Time is a Charm!,” and “The True Value of Perseverance.” Through inspirational stories, these adult learners communicate the joy and

sense of accomplishment upon earning their degree. In the process, the reader gains deep and valuable insights into strategies that promote success for this student population as well as the all-too-common barriers that impede their progress. However, as the authors themselves acknowledge, these are all success stories. What characteristics differentiate these 50 students from those who are unable to overcome the barriers to re-engaging in and finishing a degree? That question is left to further research.

One of the most striking aspects of the stories is the extraordinary value these graduates place on their degree. For these adult learners, the value goes well beyond a tangible reward for completing a sequence of courses. The come-backers compellingly describe their degree as more than a paper credential; it evokes feelings of intrinsic worth, increased self-confidence, and a strong sense of personal fulfillment and accomplishment. Receiving the diploma at graduation filled a long-standing void in their lives and signified an investment in their future and that of their children. Many portray that moment as transformational. Such sentiments bear out earlier research cited by the authors and give flesh to the theories of adult student persistence.

As compelling as these narratives are in their own right, the book has a much larger purpose. After solidly grounding the imperative to embrace the “new ‘traditional’ student” in data, research, and personal narratives, the authors introduce the Bergman model of adult student persistence in degree-completion programs. Their model draws heavily upon the extensive student persistence and retention literature, most notably, the conceptual models of Bean & Metzner (1985) and Braxton et al. (2004). The three components of the Bergman model (Student Entry Characteristics, Internal Campus/Academic Environment, and External Environment) and their associated variables come alive through the real-life experiences described in the preceding chapters. Bergman and Olson weave together the strands of the model, prior studies, and the come-backers’ stories to discuss important implications for higher education theory, research, and practice related to adult degree-completion programs. With regard to practice, the authors invite administrators of such programs to consider and actively employ the variables in the model (including previous college credit, flexible course offerings, financial support, faculty support, family influences, work influences, and hours of employment among others) in designing initiatives to increase retention and graduation rates. They also welcome additional research that further tests and refines the model in a continuous effort to enhance adult learners’ opportunities for academic success.

Bergman and Olson are clearly passionate about eliminating obstacles that impede adults from obtaining a college degree and have received accolades for their work in adult education. That sense of passion permeates this book. The short biographies of the contributing adult come-backers that follow the final chapter reflect that same enthusiasm and are worth perusing to gain a sense of their numerous accomplishments. The authors conclude this volume with a call to action that urges colleges and universities to apply lessons from the lives of adult learners to create environments that will

empower this substantial population of students to succeed. The struggles and triumphs chronicled in the previous chapters underscore characteristics inherent in the best adult-friendly campuses and degree programs such as flexible course options and delivery, convenient access, affordable cost, financial assistance, and excellent customer service. In closing, Bergman and Olson urge colleges and universities to embrace innovative, entrepreneurial approaches to re-engage adults, including rigorous prior learning assessment, which builds upon the learners' considerable knowledge and skills gained in the workplace and community settings. The need for such policies and practices that resonate with adult students has become increasingly apparent over the past decade; they are all the more crucial today to counter the adverse impacts of the pandemic and ensure equitable access to higher education.

Unfinished Business is an excellent resource for higher education administrators, faculty, and staff of adult degree-completion programs as well as graduate students and others preparing for a career in adult education. The substantial reference list encompasses influential scholarly works addressing college student retention, attrition, degree attainment, and adult learners. Of particular value is a table on page 151 that briefly summarizes key retention and persistence literature from 1938 through 2004 and the major contributions of each study. The Associates' narratives have the potential to encourage and inspire other would-be come-backers who may recognize themselves in one of the accounts. As a come-backer who is now a chief of police attests, "I would encourage anyone considering going back to school to do it. You won't be sorry you did" (p. 63). More broadly, this volume affords higher education faculty, staff, and administrators an intimate examination of the complex lives of adult students, a population they are encountering in ever greater numbers. The action-oriented interventions the authors describe (early alerts related to barriers the Associates faced, proactive communication, and use of technology and social media for ongoing support) are equally effective strategies for increasing college retention among recent high school graduates (p. 170). The stories and data presented also will prove enlightening for college trustees and other policymakers who seek a deeper understanding of adult degree-completion programs and the significant number of successful graduates overlooked by traditional college graduation rates. Readers seeking affirmation of the value of higher education and proof that "College is worth it" need look no further than the pages of this compact, accessible volume.

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About the Reviewer

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