

THE NEW COLLEGE STUDENT: THE CHALLENGES THAT IMPACT
NONTRADITIONAL STUDENTS' PERSISTENCE TOWARD DEGREE COMPLETION

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Abstract

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This paper explores published articles that report on results from qualitative and quantitative research conducted on online (Internet) and offline (non-Internet). The researchers focused on and examined distinct characteristics in defining who is classified as a nontraditional students, in particular age. The determining factors of degree completion and barriers faced by nontraditional students, which included gender role, familial impact and financial aspects were also scrutinized. The studies were conducted at the collegiate level.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

The economic recession has resulted in high unemployment rates and job instability for individuals who remain working. Many unemployed and under-employed adults are returning to school or entering college for the first time, as a way to improve their career prospects. As a result, the percentage of nontraditional students enrolled in college has grown significantly, in recent years. The characteristics of these students coupled with “two main barriers to adult learning: external (influences beyond the person’s control) and internal (personal attitude and motivation)” make degree completion more difficult for this demographic (Falasca, 2011, p. 583).

The first consideration of this paper is to explain the rise in the number of nontraditional college students and the reasons for their higher education pursuit. Next, it is important to understand and explain the factors that have been shown to affect the likelihood of completion for adult learners. Nontraditional students encounter many barriers, while attending college. These barriers are frequently the same factors that have been shown to deter completion. These barriers and the impact they have on nontraditional students will be addressed.

It is imperative to remember that many older students do successfully complete college. The strategies they use and the strengths that older students possess will be discussed. In addition, ways that colleges and universities can make changes in “strategies, policies, and practices that can improve college degree and certificate completion among nontraditional students” (Advisory Committee on Student Financial, 2011, p. 1) will be examined.

Statement of the Problem

More and more adults age 24 years and older are choosing to pursue college with the purpose of completing a degree due to either work requirements or for the fulfillment of their own personal goal. Unfortunately, there are minimal supports in place to guide and assist students from initial application process through to degree completion. Pelletier (2010) asserts the very label of ‘nontraditional’ suggests that business as usual might not work in serving this large cohort of current and potential students (p.2). In addition, researcher Jamie Merisotis, of the Lumina Foundation for Education (2010) states “one problem for adults is the constant, competing tension between life obligations and educational obligations” (p. 3). Unfortunately, life and work obligations often take precedence and in turn, the timeline for degree completion becomes greater, diminishing even more the likelihood of degree attainment.

Purpose of the Study

This paper seeks to understand the factors that influence nontraditional students’ decision to attend college in pursuit of attaining their degree and how to better support them in their persistence toward completion. Ross-Gordon (2011) notes “adult students have been a growing presence on college campuses during recent decades and there are numerous indicators that these students often referred to as ‘nontraditional’ constitute a significant proportion of the undergraduate student body” (p.26). However, along with experiencing the substantial increase in the matriculation of nontraditional students, colleges and universities are also dealing with the challenge of the upsurge in non-completion rate among them as well.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant because it advances the work of understanding the challenges nontraditional students face with juggling family, life, work and school. It also aides in discovering how changes in institutional policies, instructional and campus supports, as well as connections to community resources can greatly improve the outcome of the nontraditional student successfully reaching degree attainment.

Definition of Terms

Nontraditional Student: An adult who had transitioned from academics to a life inclusive of family, career, and other duties such as civic or volunteer services (Shepherd and Nelson, 2010, p. 10).

Interrole Conflict: The role conflict that occurs when individuals have one role or more when within a group and the behaviors and expectations and associated and is not consistent with one role and the behaviors and expectations associated with another. (Psychology Dictionary)

Delimitations of Research

The research collected for this project will focus on the challenges nontraditional students face while in pursuit of their undergraduate degree. The information on this this topic will be obtained from Ebscohost using the search engines Google, Google Scholars, UW systems and Minds@UW. The key terms utilized for this search will be nontraditional student, returning adult, barriers, adult education, and interrole conflict. A delimitation of my study is the exclusion of research from specific demographics such as ethnicity, gender and a more specific break down of ages that fit within the defined parameters.

Chapter Summary and Forecast

In chapter two I will offer a comprehensive literary review that establishes the context of the characteristics institutions use to define nontraditional students and the determining factors of whether degree attainment is achieved. The text will also discuss the intrapersonal and interpersonal aspects of nontraditional students in the institutional setting, as well as a look into how the societal perspective and ideology of Gender role impacts progression. The Final Chapter, Chapter three, will be a summary of my findings to other scholars for further research as well as recommendations for institutions to better support nontraditional students.

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

If a student has academic deficiencies or a physical handicap, they are placed into the category of nontraditional by some definitions. This wide range of characteristics may explain enrollment figures, stating that more than half of all undergraduates are nontraditional students. However, the number of college students over the age of twenty-four still continues to grow rapidly. The focus of this paper will be on the unique obstacles encountered by nontraditional students during their collegiate experience. I will begin by examining the definitions of the nontraditional student, then I will move to exploring that factors the influence their progression toward degree completion.

Definition of a Nontraditional Student

The term nontraditional student can have a wide array of meanings depending on the context and who is using the term. Fragoso, Goncalves, Ribeiro, Monteiro, Quinas, Bago, Fonseca and Santos (2013) assert the term ‘non-traditional student’ is useful to describe different groups of students that are in some way underrepresented in higher education (p. 96). However, the theme that is central to all definitions is age. Typically, nontraditional students are defined as being over the age of twenty-four. Other descriptions include students who delayed their entry to college, for at least one year after completing high school, or who have returned to college after a gap in enrollment, of at least one year. Also, students who are married or have a child are usually considered nontraditional. For the most part, nontraditional or “...mature students are characterized in the literature as needing to overcome a series of constraints to participate in education, representing barriers that are more noticeable during the transitions of mature students to higher education...” (Fragoso et al., 2013, p. 70).

Jovita Ross-Gordon (2011) defines the nontraditional student as having the following characteristics: “entry to college delayed by at least one year following high school, having dependents, being a single parent, being financially independent, attending part time, and not having a high school diploma” (p. 26). She also asserts that “...a key characteristic distinguishing reentry adults from other college students is the high likelihood that they are juggling other life roles while attending school, including those of worker, spouse or partner, parent, caregiver, and community member...” (Ross-Gordon, 2011, p. 27) and determines that reentry adults appear to be a permanent population of students.

Financial status of an individual is another consideration, in that if a college student is financially independent or financially responsible for someone other than them self, they are classified as nontraditional, as are those students with other types of significant family responsibilities. Less frequently, first generation college attendees are in the nontraditional category. Additionally, part-time students can be considered nontraditional by some definitions as well. In this section I discussed the definition of the nontraditional student. In the next section, self-identity, gender-identity and gender-roles.

Self-Identity, Gender-Identity and Gender-Role

Marsha Rossiter (2009) provides a definition of possible selves and explains the use of this method with nontraditional students in the context of their respective career transition (Rossiter, 2009). She also discusses the need for the adult counselor to use this concept citing that 80% of the nontraditional students return to higher education indicating career change or career advancement. The implications for possible selves help students to true self identify and to project themselves in the future, thus creating a career plan that embraces the positive and avoid negative situations.

Ryan, Carlstrom, Hughey, and Harris (2011) offer compelling comparative perspectives between the experiences of male student veterans with female student veteran transitioning from a military culture to higher education environment. The foundation of a successful transition begins with identifying and addressing self-identified issues ranging from new higher education environment, role changes, personal skills, physical disabilities, family interaction, social status, diversity appreciation, and various services and support systems. While both genders are oftentimes viewed as a unique student campus population, the researchers of this resource provide higher education advising staff specific strategies to address the myriad needs of student veterans thereby helping to prepare students to academically compete and successfully achieve degree completion.

The findings of authors Jacqui Taylor's and Beck House's exploratory study resulted from comparing nontraditional students ranging from those attending higher education for the first time, pre-university to graduate students, post-university, to nontraditional students who are mature versus their non-mature cohorts (Taylor and House, 2010, p. 46). The researchers expressed that while the non-traditional student population is growing, they wanted to determine what factors served as catalysts in non-traditional students' pursuit of higher education and the staying power to endure through graduation (Taylor and House, 2010).

Also, Taylor and House used as their platform variables such as group identity, altering life events impacting their livelihood, group motivation and aspiration, physical location, economic and cultural background, disabilities, and gender factors particular the challenges facing females and males and each gender respective response to their situations, as well as social interactions. The frame work of Taylor and House's study was to examine the

similarities and differences among the nontraditional students as a compilation of various groups not just one homogenous group in higher education settings.

In this section I showed that gender roles and how gender-identity offer up challenges and even holds bearings on the services offered. In the next section, factors influencing the increase in enrollment of nontraditional students will be discussed.

Reasons for the Increase in Nontraditional College Students

The pressures of economic decline such as unemployment, rise in consumer prices and a tighter credit market have made a post-secondary education more alluring and less affordable at the same time. In turn, adult learners may choose to attend college in order to change careers, enhance current job skills or as vocational retraining. Even those who are lucky enough to have a stable career may be required to occasionally take college courses to maintain licensing or certification. Likewise, rapid advancement in technology has created an environment where people often need to take classes just to keep their skills current.

According to Falasca (2011), “external forces both push and pull nontraditional students, in their decision to go to college” (p. 585). They are pulled by the hope of increased income and pushed by job loss. Many of these adults see earning a college degree as the only way they can compete in today’s difficult employment environment. The robust job market that previous generations enjoyed just does not exist today and “the current recession has driven many people to identify ways to retool themselves before reentering the job market following period(s) of unemployment” (Kimmel et al., 2012, p. 87).

Vaccaro and Lovell present their finds of their qualitative study in 2010 on the experiences of nontraditional women in higher education engagement and their support from family members. In their findings there were contrasting perspectives regarding nontraditional

women. The authors found that some researchers characterized this student populations as high achievers, having a high degree completion rate, and more educationally focused than traditional students and nontraditional males. Other researchers described nontraditional women as less engaged in their education, impacted more by family distraction, and more likely to drop out of school. The findings of their research conducted with a group of nontraditional women revealed that family played a major role in women's inspiration to return to school, be engaged in campus culture, and to graduate.

Whatever reasons a person may have for choosing to go to college later in life, the decision is rarely an easy one. Nontraditional students are often struggling to establish a new identity, while navigating the college admission process and going back into the classroom for the first time, in many years. If job loss or divorce is behind the choice to return to college, the student is usually left struggling to pay for tuition, books and other college expenses, concurrent with a significant reduction of income. In this section, the reasons why so many nontraditional students are choosing to either return or begin their collegiate career was discussed and the factors influencing the outcome of the nontraditional student's progression and completion of college will be discussed.

Determining Factors for College Completion

There are numerous variables that impact the likelihood of college completion among nontraditional students. In terms of age, researchers have defined adult learners as being as young as 22 years old. While others have placed their age at 25 years and older. "However, while age was an important criterion for the definition of a...adult learner in this study, it was not the sole criteria for inclusion" (Shepherd and Nelson, 2012, p. 6). Second, based on the human capital theory, persistence is affected by the perceived financial gain, versus cost of

education. Third, younger students have a longer expected period for reaping the rewards of education, compared to their older classmates. Finally, the trade-off for older students is further diminished if they sustain loss of wages due to having to lessen their hours working in order to attend school.

Studies show that non-traditional students enrolled part-time are much less likely to complete their degree. This is because part-time enrollment status impacts degree completion in many ways. For example, it takes longer to graduate and allows more time and opportunity for outside factors to interrupt the educational path. Hence, part-time students are less engaged in the college experience. In addition, they spend less time on campus and engage in limited interaction with faculty and classmates, outside of the classroom. This results in a limited academic support system. Research also reveal “Non-traditional university students of the last two decades or so are a much more diverse cohort consisting of large numbers of full-fee-paying international students, older, mature-age students studying mainly on a part-time basis by distance education and increasing numbers of domestic students who only in recent times have aspired to a university education” (Munro, 2011, p. 115).

Moreover, financial aid may be limited or not available to all part-time students. Paying for tuition and books, in addition to meeting the financial demands of regular life, often become more than many adult students can afford, resulting in them leaving school. The more semesters a student is enrolled in college, the greater their chances are to graduate. Munro (2011) argues that “whatever the origin of their aspirations, disadvantaged students have the requisite ambition and motivation to succeed in higher education but too often lack the cultural and social capital to fulfill their aspirations” (p.122).

Higher levels of cognitive ability are positively associated with degree completion. When students are capable of meeting the academic demands of college, they are more likely to

persist. In contrast, students with low socioeconomic backgrounds are less likely to take college preparatory coursework in high school and are less likely to graduate from college. Without the proper introductory courses, the challenges of college can become overwhelming and dropping out may seem like the only answer.

Occupational background is only a significant predictor of completion for men. However, those of both genders with managerial or professional career backgrounds have a greater likelihood of degree completion. Among craftsmen and laborers, there is a higher percentage of nontraditional. One possible explanation is that, those with higher status careers, already possess higher level skills, which will help them complete their degree more quickly. These same students also have a network of colleagues who are college educated and can serve as a support system. People from lower level occupational backgrounds have fewer resources for support, guidance and academic assistance, than higher occupational students. This decreases the chance for academic success among lower income adult students.

Barriers for nontraditional students

When most colleges and universities begin to recruit adult learners, they often overlook the fact that “adults have different needs, desires, and goals than their 18 to 24 year old counterparts” (Jinkens, 2010, p. 3). Hence, nontraditional students encounter many obstacles, when they decide to pursue a college education. According to Colvin (2013):

Within the current halls of academia there is also a new layer to the old barriers; the returning nontraditional student often encounters both ageist attitudes and a notable shift toward neoliberalism, a fundamental shift in the way universities and

other institutions of higher education have defined and justified their institutional existence. (p. 21)

Students face challenges as early as the admissions process and others after they have matriculated. This can be due to their not having yet learned how to incorporate the requirements of school to context of their professional and personal life. There are many barriers and obstacles that hinder the persistence of nontraditional students. These obstacles can be situational, educational, psychological, and institutional. Nontraditional students will often question whether or not they belong as colleges often create a culture of intimidation and alienation; ultimately causing the students to feel they are being shunned.

Institutional barriers students incur include the limited availability of classes outside of the traditional scheduling blocks, the lack of evening faculty office hours, not having advisors who are familiar with experiential learning, and instructors who are not familiar with the andragogical model. Situational barriers include time constraints, financial needs, and the demands of family and work. Time constraints may involve travel time to and from school. It may also include the time a nontraditional student must spend working, doing household chores and taking care of their children or parents, all in addition to going to classes and time spent studying. Financial demands are different for nontraditional students compared to traditional students, because nontraditional students are financially independent and usually lack the financial support from their family that traditional students frequently receive. Nontraditional students must meet the costs of non-college housing, transportation, and other adult living expenses, in addition to absorbing the cost of tuition and books. This can be overwhelming, especially if the student has recently lost financial resources through unemployment or divorce. Colvin (2103) notes “situational barriers appear to differ in intensity and combination from individual to individual” (p. 22).

Other challenges for nontraditional students are dispositional barriers. According to Colvin (2013), the dispositional barriers are always present, and most often these barriers are left to the individual to hurdle in isolation: ageist attitudes, lack of self-esteem, fear of failure (p. 23). It is difficult for older students who have had a successful career to step into the classroom again, where they may feel like novices. The idea of going to college as an adult can also be intimidating for people who may not have excelled academically in high school or during a previous attempt to attend college.

Lastly, nontraditional students experience educational barriers. Many older students are not prepared academically for the college classroom. This may be due to the curriculum chosen in high school, years away from the academic setting, students who have disabilities, and those for whom English is a second language. Munro (2011) argues more challenging is the capacity to accommodate other non-traditional students, such as those from low SES backgrounds, those with a disability, those from unrepresented ethnic and racial backgrounds and those with behavioural or emotional problems (p.119).

Familial Impact

The compelling argument of researchers Shu-chen Chiang and Josh Hawley include adulthood being impacted by the ‘re-centering’ process creating a need to seek higher education as a viable option to a better life for oneself and family. The researcher’s findings revealed that students with lower socioeconomic status had minimal family support and expectation than those with higher socioeconomic status. As a result, they experienced greater difficulty balancing work and school as they did not have a clear path to graduation, oftentimes resulting in their leaving school before graduation.

Jinmen's research shows a higher percentage of nontraditional students are married with children at the time of enrollment. His findings also show both men and women who have young children in their household are negatively impacted in their persistence toward degree completion. This is due to a shift in priorities, allocation of time, and increased financial obligations such as childcare and physical wellbeing. The demands of family and work put further strains on the older student. "In contrast to traditional students, adult students have additional responsibilities within their job and personal life that can lead to demand overload and interrole conflict when combined with school" (Giancoloa, et al, 2009, p. 247). Role conflicts occur when none of these numerous responsibilities can be completely met. For example, interrole conflict can take place when a spouse feels his time is being infringed upon due to other issues such as school or work.

Family support is critical to overcoming psychological barriers and becoming involved in campus activities. Also, family members encourage the student's persistence through graduation. Therefore, campuses that include activities for children and families assist in encouraging this type of involvement. To help in overcoming educational barriers some institutions offer pre-enrollment support, so students can improve their skills and become academically prepared for the college classroom. Such as extra tutoring or remedial courses may help nontraditional students, who score lower on standardized tests and who may enter college with lower cognitive ability, than traditional students. Because having young children has a negative impact on completion, for both men and women, the researchers suggest that colleges and universities could provide affordable, quality daycare for students.

Furthermore, there is a contrasting perspective of researchers regarding the experiences of nontraditional women in higher education engagement and their support from family members. Vaccaro and Lovell's (2010) findings characterized this student populations as high

achievers, high degree completion rate, more educationally focused than traditional students and nontraditional males. Vaccaro and Lovell (2010) also put forth in their finds of their qualitative study, conducted with a group of nontraditional women at a local college for women, that family played a major role in nontraditional women's inspiration to return to school, be engaged in campus culture, and to graduate. Given the findings the term engagement transcends to being self-invested.

Financial Aspects

Financial status is another consideration in that if a college student is financially independent or financially responsible for someone other than themselves, they are classified as a nontraditional student. Kimmel, Gaylor, Grubbs, and Hayes used a study comparing survey data from the 2004-2005 economic 'good times' with those in 2010 'hard times' to examine economic factors, level of motivation and barriers to education nontraditional students may encounter while enrolled in both face-to-face and online learning environments in four-year colleges. Items compared consisted of part-time employment, full-time employment, household income, desire for a pay increase, desire to keep the current job, a desire to enter a new field, concern about repaying student loans, and the availability of scholarships for adults. (Kimmel, et al, 2012, p. 19). Findings suggest that financial incentives such as scholarships and further development of employer assistance programs would potentially alleviate economic barriers and increase motivation of adults in persisting towards degree completion.

Chapter Summary and Forecast

Robert C. Jinkens (2009) describes nontraditional students as students who life experiences, not age, set them apart from traditional classmates in a higher educational setting. The researcher describes the difference between traditional and nontraditional students alluding that traditional students may be generally less focused on their academic achievement than nontraditional students who are more apt to excel in their academics. Nontraditional students have set achievement goals and an education is crucial to attaining them. Also, the researcher presented a comparison between traditional and nontraditional students indicating traditional students may be concern about getting high grades which is just the opposite for adult students who want to obtain as much knowledge as possible from the class.

Jinkens (2009) addressed the need for institutions to consider reframing their curriculum to take into account the educational needs and goals of nontraditional students, specifically allowing nontraditional to participate in class discussions and projects based on their real life and work experiences. Also, faculty must consider flexible schedules for nontraditional students and the need to engage them technology so that they can become familiar with faculty's expectations including the use of technology in the classroom and distance learning. Jinkens (2009) also stated that faculty and the higher education institution at-large must address not only nontraditional educational endeavors to be success but to take consider race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, age, and other variables affecting their learning experiences.

In the next chapter, I will summarize my findings and address recommendations for ways institutions can create a better academic support system for nontraditional students.

CHAPTER THREE: CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

“Before 1965 American colleges and universities were rarefied places populated, mostly by white males from middle- or upper-income families” (Brock, 2010, p. 110-111). Today, more adults than ever are pursuing higher education. “Access to higher education, it turns out, has increased substantially, although some racial and ethnic groups remain underrepresented. But success in college—measured by persistence and degree attainment—has not improved at all” (Brock, 2010, p. 110). Their choice to attend college is based on a plethora of reasons, which are as diverse as the students themselves.

Whatever reasons a person may have for choosing to go to college later in life, the decision is rarely an easy one. Nontraditional students are often struggling to establish a new identity, while navigating the college admission process and going back into the classroom for the first time in many years. The structural reasons many adults are choosing to attend college encompass but are not limited to the economic climate and the decline of traditional ordering of the life course.

Recommendations

Recommendations to better support nontraditional students include institutions having an adult student enrollment counselor available on its campuses during the evening and on weekends. Another recommendation would be for colleges and universities to not only expand policies regarding ways to earn credit for experiential learning, but ways to assess it. Additionally, institutions should improve their efforts in promoting the opportunity to earn such credits to the student, staff, faculty and employers. An additional recommendation would be to develop a campaign to support students in completing the FAFSA and to learn about possible

grants and scholarships. A final recommendation would be to create or revamp flexible degree programs that meet the needs of both students and employers.

Institutional Supports and Needed Changes

Although the number of returning adults continue to grow, the special needs of these nontraditional students are not being addressed by most educational institutions. Michelau, Lane and the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education suggest a wide array of policy changes and program implementations, for colleges and universities, to better meet the unique demands of nontraditional students. To alleviate the barriers, handbooks with a focus on assisting adult students and offices such as the ready adult concierge have been established. Identifying reenrollment as a significant barrier, institutions have begun implementing a ready adult concierge (the Concierge Model) staffed with individuals who work solely with working adults returning to college; which include guiding students through: re-entry, financial aid, course selection and registrations, the transfer credit process, as well as emotional support. Michelau, et al note that the “ready adult concierges may not be able to directly solve every issue faced by potential students, but they can help guide them to the appropriate office, work with institutional colleagues to address issues raised by students, and help institutions eliminate unnecessary burdens and obstacles that can prevent these individuals from reenrolling and earning degrees” (2010, p. 2).

Findings also show that the traditional educational programs and teaching methods are no longer a viable option for college faculty and administrators. Jeffery J. Selingo’s (2013) study indicates the need for higher education institutions to consider changing their traditional recruitment, instructional, and support services method given the increasing number of nontraditional students entering higher education. Selingo (2013) points out correlations of the

creation of the film *Monsters University* with the traditional path to college then on to a life time career, which most universities today still use as educational pattern. With there being a changing trend with this population of transferring from a four-year to a two-year and taking time off to participate in off campus programs such as internships, Selingo (2013) shared the need for higher education institutions to maintain a supportive system for nontraditional students from their initial enrollment through degree attainment.

Jinkens (2010) states traditional students may need more motivation (e.g. grade credit for homework and class attendance) whereas, with nontraditional students, faculty perhaps could concentrate more on the subject matter of the class. However, nontraditional students still face numerous barriers. By recognizing these unique challenges, colleges and universities have the ability to remove some of the obstacles and facilitate the transition into the educational environment, which will improve the chances of success for older students. Other ways nontraditional students can be assisted include scheduling more classes on nights and weekends, instituting an adult support program, providing information unique to older students on web sites, adapting orientation sessions to include information for nontraditional students, hosting specialized tutoring for adults with academic deficiencies, adult student mentoring, cooperation between community colleges and universities to aid in a smooth transition for advanced learning, availability of services at the times adult students need them, advisors trained in the special needs of older students, and establishing a task force to focus on the different challenges nontraditional students encounter.

Student Engagement

Wyatt's (2011) study provides a review of the growing need for nontraditional students to become involved in campus activities as catalysis to increasing student's endeavors to ensure their retention through graduation, degree attainment, and a better quality of life. On the other hand, the institution of higher learning must be able to understand and to address the need and challenges of this population and to play a crucial role in integrating and including nontraditional students in the campus wide culture, as most nontraditional students do not consider being involved in on campus events a high priority.

Despite the age difference between the traditional students, age 18-24, and nontraditional students, 25 and older, one of the main challenges of the institutions is to provide engagement of students on both levels, individually and collectively; taking into account students with very different population. By involving students in campus projects, academics, and community associated educational ventures, students will have a sense of belonging and will view their institution in a positive, supportive manner. Wyatt (2011) asserts that in many instances students who are active in their personal learning and educational goals on and off campus were apt to be more successful and pleased with their overall college experience. Further, the author explained that enrollment management often overlooks nontraditional students when they recruit for their institutions. Assessments from offices such as the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) in 2006 provide higher education institutions with valuable information regarding the correlations between student engagement, institutional performance, student performance, collaborative learning and other enriching educational experiences.

Credit for Experiential Learning

Authors Kenner and Weinerman (2011) describe the need for faculty and institutions to appreciate the life experiences nontraditional students bring to the campus. The framework of the study details effective strategies and knowledge faculty members can apply in their understanding and teaching nontraditional adult students between the ages 25-50. They discussed the four differences circumstances, compared to traditional, affecting nontraditional students' pursuit of a higher education, specifically noting, financial independence, full-time employment, dependents, and part-time enrollment. The authors point out the andragogy and adult learning theory results indicating the importance of faculty providing nontraditional with essential skills they need in the workforce to maintain or advance their career. They noted that returning veterans may have entirely different goals and dilemmas relative to their respective higher education, including being more mature due to their highly structured military environment and a greater understanding of globalization as it affects education.

Other strategies and theory discussed included three metacognitive frameworks, namely tacit theory, informal theory, and formal theory. Understanding and applying the theories will help faculty to design their curriculum to address nontraditional issue such as lack of academic preparation, relationship on and off campus relations, and adjustments due to transitioning to higher education. The author talks about the theory of practice which describes the impact of awareness, framing, and competition and repetition. These are all crucial to the importance of nontraditional students connecting to campus environment and faculty instruction to minimize the rate of nontraditional students dropping out of college.

Conclusion

While it is easy define and categorize the nontraditional student, it takes a great deal of effort to understand the situations that influence and impact their success in balancing life, work and family. It can be quite difficult to fathom some of the challenges nontraditional students face in their progression toward degree completion. However, it is inspiring to see how successful they can be with the appropriate supports in place.

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