The Student in Higher Education:
Nontraditional Student Retention

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In the 1980s, the nontraditional student became the norm in student populations in colleges and universities. Nontraditional students are defined by most authorities as students who are 25 years of age or older, attend colleges on a part-time basis, or commute to school, or any combination of these characteristics. The growth rate of students over 25 from 1970 to 1985 was 114% compared to a 15% increase in the number of younger students. Part-time students have increased 87% compared to a 22% increase of full-time students. Indeed, 80% of all students attending higher educational institutions are commuters (Villella & Hu, 1991).

There are many factors that have enhanced adult enrollment into colleges in the last two decades. These include the aging population, equal opportunity, and the existence of nontraditional educational experiences. People are living longer and are seeking educational experiences both for job fulfillment and for self-actualization. Adult students are either degree seekers, problem solvers, or cultural environment seekers (Noel, 1985). Equal opportunities for women and minorities have increased the numbers of nontraditional students on college campuses. Professions, vocations, and occupations have increased the educational requirements for entry level positions. These requirements can be met in planned educational programs in colleges and universities.

The attrition rate for nontraditional students is approximately 32% (Villella & Hu, 1991). Factors that affect the retention or attrition decisions of nontraditional students are difficult to determine. The underlying problem is the difficulty in defining the typical nontraditional student. The characteristics of this population are constantly changing. Some of the characteristics of the nontraditional student that impact persistence in college include sex, marital and parental status, ethnicity, and age (Marlow, 1989). Women and men experience different needs. Students with children have very different problems from students without children.

Single parents have different needs from couples with children. Many ethnic groups have needs that differ from other ethnic groups. Since the majority of students attending college today meet the nontraditional definition, it behooves higher education administration and faculty to understand why students drop out of school and why they stay in school. The purpose of this paper is to discuss (a) the factors that relate to the retention and attrition of nontraditional students, and (b) the role that college administration and faculty should play in providing the necessary services for nontraditional students.

Review of Literature

Dropping out of college involves a complex number of factors. According to Noel (1985) the major themes related to attrition appear to be academic boredom and uncertainty about what to study, transition/adjustment problems, limited and/or unrealistic expectations of college, academic under-preparedness, incompatibility, and irrelevancy. Pantages and Creedon (1978) reported that the largest attrition rate occurs among freshmen. This group is less likely to return to college at a later date. The longer students persist in college the more they will perceive that graduation from college is beneficial (Tinto, 1975). Retention studies by Pascarelli and Chapman (1983) emphasized the academic and social integration of students as a major factor in retention. Murguia, Padilla, and Pavel (1991) found that social integration into college was enhanced for ethnic groups when they have ethnic clubs or enclaves on campus. Bean (1980) found that men and women stay or leave college for different reasons. Women need to have institutional commitment, quality programs, and a sense that the role of a student is routine. Men need institutional commitment, institutional valuing of the student, routinization, and satisfaction in the student role. Institutional commitment was the most significant indicator of college satisfaction for both groups. A strong contribution to student retention appears to be a positive student-faculty relationship (Pascarella & Tetrazini, 1980). The students' adjustment to college is certainly relevant to retention and persistence in college. Mooney, Sherman, and LoPresto (1991) found that college adjustment is affected by internal academic locus of control, a high level of self-esteem, and a perception that the distance from home is "just right."

Baker, McNeil, and Siryk (1985) discuss a concept called the "matriculant myth." The myth is that the freshman expectation of the college experience is much better than the actual college experience. When the myth is less pronounced the adjustment to the college experience is better. This myth has been found in transfer students as well as freshmen (Buckley, 1971; Donato, 1973). There are individual differences in the intensity of the myth concept but these differences do not appear to be related to gender (Baker, McNeil, & Siryk, 1985).

The factors that affect the nontraditional student's participation and persistence in college are many and varied. Some factors include communications about the educational programs, previous educational success, and the availability of noncredit courses for people with low ability or lack of educational preparedness. Villella and Hu (1991) revealed that the time constraints of college terms and the amount of academic rigor required in college courses can lead to student stress and dissatisfaction. These factors can result in nontraditional students leaving college.

Some attention has been given to success in college and its relationship to adult developmental stages. Gleazer (1980) discussed Vivian R. McCoy's seven developmental stages. Each stage requires learning to handle life's tasks. These life tasks offer "teachable moments" because the motivation to complete these life tasks successfully also provides the motivation to learn. Champagne and Petitpas (1989) state that, developmentally, both traditional and nontraditional students are at a transition point in their lives when they seek formal learning. The developmental tasks may differ in the two groups but the transition process is very similar.

Implications for Higher Education

Support services for the nontraditional student should be maintained to provide the nurturance necessary for academic achievement. Strong student support services are important to the nontraditional student. University administration and faculty should avail themselves of research on college adjustment as a tool in reviewing policies and procedures on admissions, financial aid, orientation programs, academic advising, learning assistance programs, teaching and learning process, career planning and counseling, and student activities. College

administration, faculty, and staff need to be aware of nontraditional students on their campus and recognize that the category (nontraditional) may be divided into many subgroups.

One of the largest groups of nontraditional students is women over 30. For many women, the motivation to return to school is a transition point in their lives. Motivations vary from midlife transitions, divorced or widowed status, or children leaving home to the need for employment to assist with the support of the family. Some women have delayed seeking higher education until the children are in school or until the last parent dies (Menson, 1982).

Commuting students as a group seem to be at particular risk for attrition (Noel, 1985). The true commuter student is one who lives at least 50 miles from school and has not packed up and moved from home to attend school. The reasons commuter students may be at particular risk are that there is less commitment to the institution and reenrolling is more disruptive to their lives. More research is needed to understand the needs of these students.

Ethnic groups represent some of the nontraditional population. Very little research has been completed to determine if the needs of this portion of the group differ from other nontraditional students. However it seems reasonable to believe that there are differences in the needs and problems of these nontraditional students (Marlow, 1989). Black students expressed a need for more black faculty; a support system with blacks; and administrators, faculty, and staff who are sensitive to black issues. Hispanics are more likely to say that child care is a problem (Henry, 1985).

The advances in medical science and the recognition that lifestyle changes can affect health are resulting in people living longer, healthier lives. Retirement has brought about special needs in this age group. The age of students on campuses is increasing and the distinctive needs at different ages may become more critical in the future (Marlow, 1989).

College and university policies and procedures should reflect the recognition that learners of different ages and developmental stages can learn side by side and that the special benefit of learning across generations can result (Gleazer, 1980).

Admissions

With visionary marketing strategies, the admissions staff could ensure that more students are choosing to attend the right institutions for their individual needs. Nontraditional students should have access to programs that give them a realistic view of academic rigor and the challenges of learning. Recruitment efforts should include the cost in time, energy, and commitment that is required to achieve in an academic discipline. The type of students recruited should be those who are compatible with the specific program and institution.

Financial Aid

Financial aid programs should make an assertive attempt to assist students in gaining financial assistance through grants, part-time employment, student assistant programs, or personal money management techniques. The minimal financial aid that is available to part-time students should be well publicized so that nontraditional students may avail themselves of this service (Noel, 1985).

Orientation Programs

Orientation programs should serve as a continuing process of integrating students into college life rather than just a transition between high school and college. Programs should be provided that will follow the nontraditional students throughout their college years. Periodic sessions should be held so that students can share their frustrations and needs. Learning skills' workshops should be an integral part of any comprehensive orientation program. Topics such as time management, study skills, learning to use the learning resources, and other topics suggested by the students could be covered in these sessions.

Academic Advising and Counseling

Academic advising must be improved through better training and evaluation of advisers. Institutions should provide competent advisers and well-trained staff who are alert to the special problems of nontraditional students who are at risk of dropping out of school. One of the major considerations in promoting commitment to college for nontraditional students is the support of family and friends. When nontraditional students return to school someone has to take over their responsibilities. Counseling programs should be available that will help the student communicate the importance of both the educational endeavor and the need for the support of family and friends if the

student is to succeed.

Learning Assistance Programs

Learning assistance programs should be available to help underprepared students achieve college level work. Programs must be designed that will assist students to "fill in" educational gaps. Students should not be taught to just achieve college entry level scores on reading, writing, and arithmetic placement tests.

Career Planning

Career planning methods should be a high priority service for college administration. Persistence in college is related to a strong career planning program (Noel, 1985). Students should not be pressured to continue in programs where they do not achieve satisfaction. Interventions with career counseling or other college programs should be initiated before the student makes the decision to drop from school.

Teachers and the Learning Process

Teachers should be involved with students, recognize their progress in class, and know when they are absent from class. Teachers should select the content and design the delivery method of college courses so that the relationship to the adult role is vivid and realistic. The teacher must plan learning activities well in advance so that nontraditional students can make necessary arrangements for child care or job responsibilities. Adults interested in learning want courses that inform; that meet their work or family schedules; that are readily available, practical, realistic, and without the flavor of traditional schooling (Gleazer, 1980). Colleges can assist these students by providing programs that are relevant to life and that meet the individual needs of the student. Generally, the student role for adult students is secondary to family or occupational responsibilities. The adults are usually self-directed learners who do not want to spend time in what they consider meaningless experiences.

Student Activities

Support should be given to student activity programs that promote college achievement for nontraditional students. Some of the factors that will keep these students reenrolling are promoting participation in special activities of the school, acquiring a part-time job on campus, providing child care on or near the campus, and providing adequate parking near the classroom buildings.

Summary

Many services, programs, and/or courses can be offered by colleges that will facilitate the nontraditional student's progress in colleges and universities. Attention should be given to creative class scheduling. Weekend classes that meet the same number of hours but fewer times each term would allow the student the time for work responsibilities as well as school. Block hours should be utilized in undergraduate classes as they are for graduate classes to enable students to travel one day a week per term to meet the class hours for the course.

One of the newest delivery methods for subject content is distance learning. Every teaching need cannot be met in the traditional classroom. Small numbers of students in several localities can be taught by one teacher through distance learning technology. Video-based interactive instruction resembles the traditional classroom instruction and may be the choice in distance learning systems for nontraditional students (U.S. Congress, 1989). Technologies for learning at a distance will affect the educational programs of tomorrow and must be considered as a viable option for nontraditional students.

Noel's (1985) statement, "When we get student success, satisfaction and learning together, persistence is the outcome," is just as true for nontraditional students as it is for traditional students. Successes in college for the nontraditional students relate to programs and services both in the classroom and on campus. Research on college adjustment must reform college administrative practices and college teaching.

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