WHEN PARENTS BECOME STUDENTS:

An examination of experiences, needs, and opportunities which contribute to student parent engagement in community college

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Abstract

While college and university student profiles are changing rapidly, many of our practices and support systems are geared to traditional student profiles. This article focuses on findings from a recent study examining the experiences of student parents enrolled in community colleges, and examines the kinds of student services that help student parents remain engaged in their classes and persist to graduation. This study offers insight on transformative practices for supporting non-traditional, student parents on community college campuses. This study offers a paradigm shift for advisors, counselors and faculty at higher education institutions so that they may effectively engage and support student parents. The research includes student parents who have one or more dependent children aged 17 or younger and who are enrolled as full-time or part-time students. The study investigates some of the barriers to student parent success as well as the challenges they face. The study identifies, describes, and analyzes the support services which are being utilized by student parents, and review successful models of support in surrounding institutions. Nora's (2006) Student Engagement Model is used as a theoretical framework for this study. The results from this study should be of interest to student affairs professionals and higher education administrators alike, as they reflect the needs and challenges of the growing student parent population and inspire those searching for ways on how to support this unique, growing community of students.

Introduction

Nearly a quarter of postsecondary students in the United States are parents, yet only 40 percent of these students are expected to complete their degree (U.S. Department of Education, 2007). Limited research has been conducted on the experiences and unique needs of those who decide to pursue a degree while concurrently holding the role as parents (Brooks, 2011; Springer et al., 2009). Research has shown institutional support services to have one of the biggest impacts on student success (Braxton, Milem, & Sullivan, 2000; Cofer & Somers, 2001; Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994; Woosley, 2003). Many colleges and universities encourage nontraditional students to enroll and emphasize their mission of promoting lifelong learning, but the research, services, financial resources, and programs do not reflect an understanding about nontraditional students' needs and circumstances, thereby maintaining an institutional system designed for a different type of student (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011; Hadfield, 2003). Published articles and studies note various suggestions for higher education institutions to implement in order to improve the success rate of nontraditional students (Belcher & Michener, 1998; Hadfield, 2003; Purslow & Belcastro, 2006; Urchick, 2004). Yet most of these studies fail to address the specific support needs and programs for a subcategory of nontraditional students, student parents. It is essential to better understand who this population is, what programs are in place to support them, and what support services can help them remain engaged in their classes in order to persist to graduation (Hadfield, 2003; McGivney, 2004; Sandler, 2000).

The overall aim of the study was to contribute to existing literature and develop student support services for this population in higher education by focusing on three research questions: 1) What are the experiences of student parents which can help them remain engaged in order to persist to graduation?, 2) What student services are provided to student parents?, 3) What support services can help student parents remain engaged in their classes in order to persist to graduation?

The study was conducted at Purdue Community College[1], a large, public, 2-year institution located in Northern California (NCES, n.d.). While the number of student parents is not tracked at this institution, Purdue College's Extended Opportunity Programs and Services (EOPS) program

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[1] Pseudonym

has been serving over four times the number of nontraditional students than allocated by State funding, indicating a large target population ("Program Review," 2009).

Discussion

The discussion of study findings is based upon themes which emerged from the interview protocol. The interview protocol framework was provided by Nora (2003) who emphasized the unique interaction between the student and the institution. The interaction produces a connection, such as engagement, between the student and the institution which ultimately leads to persistence (Nora, 2003). The interaction is influenced by a variety of elements and addresses pre-college, institutional, and environmental factors which are associated to the college experience that influence student persistence and graduation: (1) precollege/pull factors- past experiences, prior academic achievement, financial circumstances, level of encouragement and support from family and significant others, (2) sense of purpose and institutional allegiance- educational aspirations and commitment to attend and graduate, (3) academic and social experiences- student perceptions of the relationship between student and support staff, opportunities for academic and social integration, provision and utilization of support services that promote student success, (4) cognitive/non-cognitive outcomes- demonstration of investment in the students and validation of their presence on campus, (5) goal determination/institutional allegiance- student perceptions of sense of belonging, and whether the attainment of their education goal was a worthwhile experience, (6) and persistence- demonstration of investment in their education through persisting to the next semester and/or higher degree.

Pre-college and Pull Factors. Nontraditional students have limited interactions with other groups within the college community, and therefore draw support from external sources such as family, coworkers, and friends (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Graham & Gisi, 2000; Kasworm & Blowers, 1994). Family support, defined as help getting children to school or caring for children, along with emotional support, was named as an important life experience contributing to the student parent's ability to manage dual roles (Burris, 2001). When asked to describe the kinds of encouragement and support they were receiving in their academic journey, the majority of participants in this study mentioned a spouse, family member, friend, or therapist who provided

various types of support. Verbal encouragement, brainstorming essay topics, providing child care during class times, and simple reminders to finish homework assignments were some of the types of support student parents named as having received from their support persons. For these participants, support was a significant factor that made persistence in college possible.

Many nontraditional students find it difficult to juggle the roles of student, employee, and family member and that a great deal of assistance is needed in building their self confidence as students, restoring study skills, and time and resource management. For many of these individuals, balancing multiple life-roles creates a unique set of challenges and requires services to address their needs (Fairchild, 2003; Medved & Heisler, 2001; Mercer, 1993). Time conflicts, sick children, lack of child care support, work responsibilities, inconvenient class time, employment, and adjustment difficulties are a part of the lives of this growing student population (Carlin, 2001; Jacobs and King, 2002; Mercer, 1993; Fairchild, 2003). For the participants in this study, juggling multiple roles came with its own challenges, including lack of time. Various degrees of difficulty were reported by the participants, depending on the roles being balanced and the amount and type of support available. Only three participants were involved in campus clubs and activities. Others expressed interest in attending activities and joining clubs but said they could not due to time constraints. The majority of student parent participants expressed a desire to restore study skills and learn time management skills via workshops and guest speakers.

Purpose and Allegiance. Literature has demonstrated that student parents often do not persist in the community college sector (Berkner et al., 2007). However, in this study, ten out of the twelve student participants demonstrated a strong commitment to attend and graduate through the various statements made in the interviews as well as their discussions regarding recent classroom and GPA success. All participants were maintaining a GPA above 3.5 and were striving to earn a 4.0 GPA. Four participants who were a semester away from graduation had been accepted to transfer to a nearby university.

Academic and Social Experiences. Building relationships with faculty members plays a crucial role in retention through a stronger sense of integration for nontraditional students in community colleges (Kasworm, 2003). Encouragement and support from staff members can also lead to validation of nontraditional students' needs and experiences (Nora, 2003). Participants in

this study indicated that faculty members had a positive impact on student parents and their engagement in the classroom. Examples of faculty understanding and support was expressed in examples of flexible homework and exam due dates, working with student parent learning disabilities, allowing participants to bring their child to class when childcare fell through, demonstrating understanding of tardiness due to a breast milk pumping schedule, and deep, encouraging conversations between student parent and professor.

Due to time constraints in caring for their families, nontraditional students are much less involved in campus activities and may only interact with their peers while attending class (Graham & Donaldson, 1997). All participants mentioned a strong connection to their professors and described interacting with faculty outside out the classroom environment. This finding coincides with the Weaver and Qi (2005) study, which discovered that nontraditional students visited their professors more often than their traditional counterparts.

Having children and raising a family while trying to complete homework assignments and study for exams introduces new barriers to an already difficult and often overwhelming process (Detore-Nakamura, 2003; Gerber, 2005; Jirón- King, 2005; O'Reilly, 2002). Participants mentioned some challenges which impeded their success and engagement, including frustration with locality of the campus child care, lack of time to finish school and personal transportation, and homelessness. Of the challenges mentioned by the participants in this study, homelessness was a challenge which was not found in the literature reviewed.

Institutional support programs have one of the biggest impacts on student success (Braxton et al., 2000; Cofer & Somers, 2001; Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994; Woosley, 2003). The support services available at Purdue College are Admissions, Assessment and Orientation, SWORC, CARE, Career and Transfer Center, Cashier, Counseling Office, DSPS Office, EOPS, Financial Aid, Welcome Center, Duo, Tutoring, and Veteran's Affairs. Participants who had received assistance communicated that they felt that they were a valued member of the college. An analysis of the interview responses indicated that all the participants were aware of the services available to them, but the degree of usage varied among the participants.

The stress of asking for assistance is greater in nontraditional students when compared with their traditional-age peers (Conrad, 1993). One participant gave an example of this when

she stated that she only asks for help when she runs out of options. Another participant also demonstrated this when she stated that she did not know how to ask for help when she first started college, so she set herself back in the application process. Many student parents have difficulty accessing information about services which are available to them, which may mean that students may potentially leave their program perceiving no way to accommodate their parental and student status (Springer, et al. 2009).

Childcare was a primary concern for the participants. Participants recommended a local child care referral program where student parents could access a list of students or daycares in the area. This idea came second to having a child care center on campus. Availability of child care has been found to be important to the success of student parents, and there is a positive relationship between the accessibility of child care on college campuses and retention rates (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002; Gmelch, 1998; Keyes & Boulton, 1995; Matus-Grossman & Gooden, 2002).

Support services identified for student parents include peer group support meetings, mentoring programs, and workshops. Another idea brought up by the participants in this study was an integration of personal life workshops into the already existing budgeting workshops on campus. Participants expressed an interest in learning about time management, balancing their personal and student life, being a single parent, and positive child rearing. Participants also expressed interest in hearing directly from alumni student parents, as they stated that workshops which featured these guest speakers would be of great benefit.

Some child care centers also have readily accessible academic advisors or counselors specifically assigned to the child care facility to discuss academic, personal, or parenting issues (IWPR, 2009). Green (1998) even suggested that a swift transition to college was possible through the creation and implementation of a Re-Entry Student Center that incorporated all phases of a nontraditional student experience. In this study, the idea which participants expressed a great amount of interest in was the creation of student parent clubs, organizations, and centers. Participants described this idea in depth, noting that the student parent club would be made up of student parent peers searching for support and belonging at the college. Members of the club would focus on assisting each other in working through academic and parenting issues. The

student parent club would be a small branch of the student parent center, an idea which they expressed the most interest. The student parent center would mirror that of the neighboring state university, which included readily available financial aid and academic advisors as well as representatives from specific programs such as SWORC, EOPS, and Duo.

Cognitive/Non-cognitive Outcomes. Higher education institutions must create academic and social environments in and out of the classroom which make the nontraditional student feel validated (Kim, 2002). In this study, all student participants mentioned struggling with finding validation of their presence on campus more than once.

Goal Determination and Institutional Allegiance. All participants in this study mentioned an initial sense of uneasiness and felt that they did not fit in to the college environment when they first started their educational journey. Kim (2002) found that nontraditional students have personal apprehensions begin before even enrolling in college, primarily through a fear of rejection from their college application and a negative self-assessment. The pressures and anxieties that student parents carry with them as they make their decision to enroll after being away from the academic setting can often lead to increased negative feelings toward entering higher education once again (Conrad, 1993). In this study, students who felt a sense of belonging to the college also mentioned feeling supported by the college. For students who had yet to develop a connection, it was difficult to find support for academic advising, opportunities for involvement, or financial advising.

One of the aspects of their experiences agreed upon by all participants was that the attainment or near attainment of their education goal was a worthwhile experience, and that their graduation plans were solidified and reachable. When participants were asked what had prompted them to begin or return to college, getting an education that could lead to a better salary to better provide or help provide for their families was a resounding answer. More than half of the participants also indicated that they wanted to set an example for their children. Overwhelmingly, all the study participant interviews stated that their reasons for beginning or returning to college was due to having increased employment opportunities or the ability to change their vocational careers. The research has shown that the majority of nontraditional

students state a motivating factor in attending college is for career advancement (Kasworm, 2003).

Nontraditional student maturity and life experiences can lead to higher academic achievements than anticipated (Kim, 2002). Participants in this study mentioned that having experienced and succeeded with struggles in life provided them a sense of determination and strength, which assisted them in reaching educational goals, and earning higher grades in their classes.

Persistence. Student engagement, retention, and development theorists (Astin, 1999; Kuh, 2009; McClenney et al., 2006; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1993) suggest positive correlations between engagement, student learning, and persistence (Hunter & Linder, 2005). Engagement influences the level of commitment during the academic journey, enhances their educational experiences, increases personal development outcomes, and thus the likelihood of successfully completing that journey (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011; Pace, 1980). The student participants made efforts locate college services and strived to earn the highest GPA possible. They sought ways to incorporate classroom material into their lives. Despite difficult circumstances- like financial issues, homelessness, concern about caring for children and family members- these students persisted.

Recommendations for Higher Education Institutions

The three recommendations which emerged from this study can be used to improve student parent engagement and retention at Purdue College. However, these recommendations are applicable at any college or university.

Recommendation 1: Annual Review of Institutional Practices Related to the Delivery of Services and Support of Student Parents. The results of the study indicate a need for an institutional policy that encourages an annual review and monitoring of student support services. In this study student parent participants indicated that they felt the college was not interested in their initial or continuous feedback. Higher education administrators should evaluate whether student parents are engaged in ongoing dialogue designed to help learners make informed educational planning decisions. Administrators should also evaluate whether student services are accessible and convenient to student parents through a variety of venues. Student service

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office hours were centered around business hours, 9 am to 4 pm, tailored to the traditional student class schedule. Institutions should evaluate whether the high-quality services are provided during the hours that student parents will be available to utilize them. Colleges that serve a large student parent population should evaluate whether the establishment of programs to ease the entry of these students into the institution are feasible. Specific examples of this include a student parent orientation program, a student parent club, and/or a student parent center, where student parents can bring their children to a nearby play area while receiving financial, social, and/or academic support.

Recommendation 2: Enhancement of Physical Facilities. Many institutions have been paying more attention to physical facilities recently in an effort to modernize and beautify their campuses through adding space to accommodate increasing enrollment. These small campus transformations are designed to reflect the high-quality of educational programs offered to students and engage those enrolled. The researcher confirmed a lack of changing space in restrooms as well as lack of lactation rooms at Purdue College. This tends to be the case with many colleges and university. Therefore, the researcher recommends colleges should spend time exploring and developing similar updates designed for student parents such as lactation rooms and changing tables. In some cases, adding these small physical details is low-cost, as small, unused rooms and closets can easily be converted. Corners of a lounge adjacent to the women's restroom can be walled off with either permanent walls or portable partitions. These small changes would provide a direct connection to validate the student parents' presence on campus, nurture their development, and could increase retention. Services most desired by student parents are local child care referral programs, personal life workshops, student parent clubs, and student parent centers.

Recommendation 3: Tracking of Student Parents. Purdue College does an excellent job of recording and publishing student population statistics. While the college has utilized the student engagement surveys in the past, the concept of following up with students is not consistent. The student participants felt that there was no commitment to track their engagement or satisfaction. The college does not have any data on why student parents leave without completing their degree, as they do not keep record of student parent data. With student parents

encompassing such a considerable portion of the student population in the United States and with the tightening distribution of tuition dollars, it is imperative that institutions track the retention of all student sub-groups. A study that analyzes the retention of student parents might yield rich data that could enhance programs and improve student satisfaction and engagement.

Conclusion

The results of this study support Nora's (2003) perspective that student persistence and graduation are influenced by pre-college, institutional, and environmental factors which are associated to the college. The data found in this study supports the idea that when there is a connection between the student parent and the institution, students demonstrate a greater degree of persistence through their experiences. Finally, students who had various types of social and academic support also shared a greater connection to the college community and a higher likelihood in achieving their educational goals.

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