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Nontraditional College Students' Needs of Counseling

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Introduction

This study explored nontraditional college students' needs of counseling. Forty-three undergraduate students, 22 males and 21 females, with a mean age of 37.69 ($SD = 8.43$) completed 60-minute structured interviews. Qualitative research methodology based in grounded theory was used in data synthesis.

This study identified the central concept of recognizing/using resources interacting with five themes: (a) academic work, (b) financial issues, (c) career development, (d) life transition, and (e) family/social support system. Most nontraditional students suggested that counseling centers would help them recognize/use resources in life, work, and support systems to deal with the multiple stressors in their academic and personal lives. Besides academic work, nontraditional college students face financial issues, jobs after education, the life transition of returning to school, and less time with family/friends. This study suggests that counseling centers should provide nontraditional students with academic assistance, personal counseling, and vocational counseling to meet their needs.

Nontraditional College Students' Needs of Counseling

The number of nontraditional college students, that is, those over 25 years of age, has been increasing rapidly over the past few decades.

Indeed, this group of students has grown from less than 4 million in 1980 to more than 6 million in 2000 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001), and now comprises approximate 40% of the total U.S. undergraduate population (National Center for Education Statistics, 1997). Despite the tremendous increase in the number of non-traditional college students, relatively few scholars and practitioners focus their attention on them. A particularly notable deficit in the information about this population pertains to understanding their expectations of counseling centers' service and their perspectives of their college education (Kroth & Boverie, 2000; Justice & Dornan, 2001). Indeed, most studies of counseling centers focus on traditional college students (under 24 years old), whose developmental stages, preferred learning styles, family needs, vocational issues, professional struggles, financial issues, self-esteem, motivation, and values are different from those of their non-traditional colleagues (Donaldson & Graham, 1999). Simply applying counseling skills from traditional students to nontraditional students would fail to address nontraditional students' specific needs and aspirations for pursuit of their education.

Counseling nontraditional students has significance beyond merely serving a specific student population, that is, nontraditional students versus traditional ones. The very concept of diversity in counseling would not be complete without taking into consideration the unique viewpoints, needs, and valuable contributions of nontraditional students. Among its many roles, counseling has two important ones: "person-environment interactions and educational and career development of individuals in educational and vocational environments" (Gelso & Fretz, 1992, p. 9). Counseling advocates for contextualizing services to meet the needs of diverse populations, such as providing professional assistance to meet the specific personal, vocational, and educational issues of nontraditional students. Furthermore, such issues are sufficiently distinct to represent *diversity* in counseling. Unfortunately, although their numbers on college campuses have increased over the past decades, nontraditional students have thus far failed to garner sufficient attention in counseling.

To understand nontraditional college students' expectations of counseling, this research applied grounded theory to explore this population's needs. Grounded theory provides a good methodology by which to understand their perspectives on college counseling. According to Strauss and Corbin (1990), such "theory was derived from data, systematically gathered and analyzed through the research process...grounded theories, because they are drawn from data, are likely to offer insight, enhance understanding, and provide a meaningful guide to action" (p. 12). Using grounded theory, this study explores why non-traditional students are willing to invest so much for college degrees, what their needs for counseling and expectations from counseling centers are, what their supports are, how they feel about pursuing college education, and how they adjust to college life.

Method

Participants and Procedures

Participants were 43 nontraditional undergraduate students (23 women and 20 men) at a large Midwestern university. Participants ranged in age from 26 to 62 years, with a mean age of 37.69 ($SD = 8.43$). Forty participants attended evening programs, and 3 attended day programs; 36 were full-time students, and 7 were part-time students. Prior to returning to college, they had been employed from 7 to 40 years, with the mean of 18.85 years ($SD = 7.64$). Participants were recruited by flyers on campus and class announcements and received $5.00 gift certificates in compensation for participation. Two advanced doctoral students in counseling psychology served as interviewers, with interviews lasting approximately 1 hour. All 43 hours of audiotaped interviews were transcribed for subsequent analysis. During the interviews, grounded theory procedures proposed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and later expanded by Strauss and Corbin (1990) were followed.

Data Analysis Procedures

Data were systematically analyzed in sequential stages; and

concepts were coded, categorized, and synthesized, yielding meaningfully interrelated constructs.

Concept coding. According to grounded theory, data were broken down into concrete parts to examine similarities and differences (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The researchers met to discuss their concepts, eliminate duplicates, and create a list of concepts that would include all concepts presented in the transcripts.

Category generation. The researchers read the transcripts and the concept lists to find interrelationships among concepts. The researchers then reviewed the list of categories, eliminated duplicates, and made sure each concept was in at least one category. At the end of the process, the final category list was developed.

Axial coding. Axial coding and auditing followed category generation. At this stage, researchers clarified the relations among categories to lead to the generation of key categories. To accurately retrieve raw data, concepts, and key categories, each transcript was coded into QSR N5@, a program designed to yield a list of concepts, categories, and corresponding raw data (Powell, 1999).

Results

The study resulted in a theoretical model of nontraditional college students' needs for and expectations of college counseling. The concept of recognizing/using resources was central to their needs for and expectations of counseling centers, and the concept critically interacts with five themes: (a) academic work, (b) financial issues, (c) career development, (d) life transition, and (e) family/social support system. Apparently, due to their needs to recognize and use resources, they also expected counseling centers to help manage their education, employment work, family, and interpersonal relationships.

They were found to expect counseling centers to help incorporate diverse resources from family, friends, teachers, and themselves to pursue a college education. Many students expressed their needs in recognizing and using resources around them to reduce multiple stressors in their personal lives, their work, and their family relationships; they needed counseling services to show them ways

and strategies.

Although external and internal rewards strengthened hopefulness regarding college education, most of them still wanted to improve their abilities to incorporate resources for their new lives at school. As one student indicated, "Many difficulties originate in our ignorance of finding out resources around us." Their need to increase hopefulness guides other five interactive expectations—motivation enhancement, financial management, career development, relationships, and life transition—and all these expectations suggested that students needed counseling to integrate the mental, educational, and vocational aspects of life.

Recognizing and using resources. In many ways, how nontraditional students (indeed, all people) recognize and use resources affects how they perceive themselves. The abilities to find/ use resources reflect the belief that one can find pathways to desired goals and can be motivated to use the pathways. Nontraditional students reported that use of resources motivated their struggles with financial concerns, career development, relationships, and life transition. Such hopefulness provided self-efficacy, allowing them to believe that they could overcome difficulties in these five areas. Some nontraditional students *are* benefited by *actively* incorporating diverse resources, work and life experiences, and high motivation to resolve potential barriers to their college education. For example, one 32-year old participant said,

> Before I came back to school, I already expected to face a lot of difficulties in school, work, family, and friends. But surprisingly, after I started my first semester, I also enjoyed the process of working through so many difficulties. People around me are so proud of me now.

Academic work. Although some studies suggest that non-traditional students have poor study skills, low self-confidence, and fear of coming back to school (Donaldson & Graham, 1999), many participants expressed high motivation to complete a college education despite academic difficulties by adjusting to the new learning environment.

Many nontraditional students returned to school because school represented a resolution of a *financial issue*; often, their previous employment provided inadequate income, and college education was seen as a means to address that problem. As a 46-year old participant said:

> In America, you know . . .without a college degree, you can't earn too much money . . . no matter how much you work . . . it's just impossible. It sounds cynical, perhaps, but I think most Americans see you according to how much money you earn.

Nontraditional students actively integrate their college education into their career development (Powell, 1999). Education or training has been one essential component valued by workplaces (Bridges, 1993). In this study, some people pursued a college education because they "felt stuck with their current jobs." Other participants intended to use their college education to change career goals. They saw the process of earning a degree as facilitating career development. As one 28-year old observed, "I was working at a law firm. I was making nice money for someone without a college education, but there was a lady who has been there for 20 years; she was on the track I didn't want to be in. So I decided that if I want to do more on my professional work, I need to get my degree."

Some nontraditional students returned to school primatily because of life transitions, such as recent physical disability, divorce, or redefining long-term life goals. According to Donaldson and Graham (1999), nontraditional students pursued college education to respond to work or life transitions that were different from the transition periods or goals of traditional students. These life transitions force them to change to different jobs, like the 43-year-old student who reported that "my previous job as a construction worker physically disabled me, and I cannot go back to that kind of job anymore, so I need to change to a different work. To have skills for a new job, I need to complete a college education." Other participants mentioned how marital discord forced them to make life transitions. For instance, one 34-year-old participant said,

> I had a tumultuous marriage before I came back to school. After divorce, I noticed that I really wanted to do something new; I wanted to have a new life, new job, and new self. To reach the new experiences, including new career, I thought a college education would be the first step.

For these students, further education opened up a new world for them because college education promised them new expertise, knowledge, and skills.

This study found that perceived support from relationships, family, friends, and academic professors were crucial components. Nontraditional students' decision to pursue more education affects their relationships with family and friends as well as other interpersonal relationships. Among these various relationships, the nontraditional students commitment to the student role motivated them to negotiate their work, family responsibility, and interpersonal relationships to achieve their goal in completing a college education (Cross, 1981). As one 38-year-old participant described her changing relationships after coming back to school:

> My husband encouraged me to earn a college degree since he knew I was stuck with my work. Then we negotiated on sharing our responsibilities of taking care of kids. He sometimes needed to be at home when I was in school. But, you know, my kids like to do their homework just like I was doing mine. So I guess I set up a role model for my kids.

Summary

Nontraditional college students face numerous stresses and challenges not encountered by their traditional counterparts, including financial issues, jobs after education, and the life transition of returning to school. This study was conducted to determine the counseling needs of nontraditional college students. Research in the form of face-to-face interviews was conducted, resulting in the identification of the

central concept of recognizing/using resources that interact with five themes: (a) academic work, (b) financial issues, (c) career development, (d) life transition, and (e) family/social support systems. The study demonstrated that counseling centers need to provide these students with academic assistance, personal counseling, and vocational counseling.

Conclusion

This study showed that nontraditional students hoped to recognize and use diverse resources from family, friends, teachers, and themselves to solve their difficulties in pursuing college education. Their need for counseling on recognizing and using resources guided five interactive factors: academic work, financial issues, career development, life transition, and relationships. Because of these needs, counselors are urged to provide a collaborative comprehensive service to this population.

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Appendix

Interview Questions
1. Are you a full-time or a part-time student?
2. What is your expected time to finish the degree?
3. What do you expect counseling centers to help you do?
   - (p) Could you describe how you came to have those expectations?
   - (p) Could you say what led you to have those expectations?

Appendix
Interview Questions

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   - (p) Could you describe how you came to have those expectations?
   - (p) Could you say what led you to have those expectations?
4. On whom do you rely for encouragement or support? How do you expect counseling centers to help you?
   - (p) Who do you say offered you encouragement or support?
   - (p) On whom do you rely for *academic* encouragement and support?
   - (p) On whom do you rely for *emotional* encouragement and support?
   - (p) On whom do you rely for *financial* encouragement and support?
5. How have they supported you?
   - (p) Academically, if there is any support, how did the above people support you?
   - (p) Emotionally, if there is any support, how did the above people support you?
   - (p) Financially, is there is any support, how did the above

people support you?

6. How have your college studies affected relations with your significant people?

   (p) How did these changes come up?

7. What are your career goals? How do they relate to your college degree?

   (p) Will you continue your original work after completing your studies? (Please describe)

   p) Will you have new career goals after you obtain your degree? (Please describe)

8. How quickly did you adjust to the role of a nontraditional college student?

   (p) What were the difficulties when you began your college education?

Note. (p) denotes possible follow-up queries.

Figure 1. Non-traditional Students' Perspectives on Pursuing College Education