Barriers for Non-Traditional Students in Higher Education

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Abstract: The purpose of this study is to examine the barriers non-traditional students experience in their attempt to complete their degree program. Semi-structured interviews revealed four key themes: family; support; generational-gaps, and community. These themes highlight areas in which non-traditional students feel they have experienced obstacles in reaching their educational goals. Results of this study may be used as a tool for institutes of higher education to recognize the unique challenges that non-traditional students face and use this knowledge to provide better resources and other forms of encouragement to help these students complete their degree program.

Keywords: Non-traditional, student, university, barriers, degree

With an increasing population of older individuals returning to pursue their degrees in higher education it is important to understand what, if any, unique challenges they encounter on the path to completing their degree. Many studies show that these returning adults are at a higher risk of not completing their degree program than are younger, traditional students (Tumuheki, Zeeler, & Openjuru, 2018). Past research focuses primarily on the negative factors that non-traditonal students encounter, giving little insight into what these students felt might help them to complete their program. Obtaining an overall picture of the problems non-traditonal students face in completing their degree program and how they feel they could be better served can provide a deeper understanding of the unique challenges that non-traditional students experience and why many find it difficult to complete their program of study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this study, a non-traditional student is defined as 25 years of age or older. Research indicates these individuals are more likely to be living away from home, have a partner, and have dependent children (Trowler, 2015). These outside responsibilities are shown to be a primary reason related to non-traditional students' failure to complete their degrees (Priode, 2019). Most studies focus on factors that negatively impact non-traditional students. One of the most restrictive factors is lack of support services for non-traditional students (Kearney, Stanley, & Blackberry, 2018; Priode, 2019). Another issue that is cited is the lack of required internet access and scant technical support available outside of campus (Safford & Stinton, 2016).

Financial difficulties and emotional factors also play a role (Kearney, Stanley, & Blackberry, 2018). There are few financial aid resources or services available for non-traditional students. Research also shows that non-traditional students tend to feel a gap between themselves

and the feeling of community that more traditional students experience, and that university programs in place are not appropriate to meet their specific needs (Steele & Erisman, 2016). Limitations of the existing literature include the focus on specific issues, such as external factors or internal factors, the prioritization of negative factors, and lack of suggestions from participants on ways that univerisities could better support them.

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study took place on the campus of a small college in the Southwestern United States during the fall semester of 2022. Undergraduate students, 25 years of age and older, were asked to participate via social media websites including Facebook and by flyers posted on campus. Purposive sampling was employed. After obtaining consent, participants completed a short demographic survey and then participated in 20–30-minute interviews to discuss what barriers they have faced in their pursuit of a college degree. A semi-structured interview model was employed. Sessions were audio recorded and any identifying information was removed from the transcripts.

Questions asked examined if participants had experienced any barriers in completing their degree program and how they believe these barriers could been eased or eliminated (Appendix A). After completing all interviews transcripts were analyzed using an inductive coding structure. To better capture the voice of the participants In Vivo coding was employed to develop coding categories. These categories were further analyzed to identify themes and subthemes. Descriptive statistics were calculated for all demographic information.

PARTICIPANTS

Six participants (N=6) participated in the research study. Participants ranged from 25-49 years of age, with a mean age of 38 and a standard deviation of years. Demographics are listed in Table 1.

RESULTS

Upon analysis of the data four major themes emerged: *family, support, generational-gaps, and community*. The first theme, *family*, contained two sub-themes. The first was stress on both the family and the individual. Many participants voiced feelings of guilt and stress associated with the time that was taken away from their family to concentrate on school. They often felt a lack of support from family members. Another stressor was the financial strain of attending college. Participants had a hard time justifying the cost of furthering their education when they already had so many financial responsibilities. Lee, a single mom, said, "I run low on money. I can't go to classes and also get a job." The second sub-theme was that of commitments. Participants felt a conflict between the commitment to bettering themselves and their commitment to their family. Tyler voiced the common issue of time constraints, "When you work so much it's hard to think about taking on more responsibility." Bob voiced the frustration many non-traditional students have balancing work, family, and school, "Something's gonna have to give at some point." Although perceived as barriers many participants did find some positive outcomes such as becoming better at time management.

Table 1
Demographic Information

Race		Employment	
White	5	Full-Time	2
Native American	1	Part-Time	3
		Unemployed	1
Marital Status		**Student Status**	
Married	4	Full-Time	6
Divorced	1	Part-Time	0
Single	1		
Number of Children		**Class**	
Zero	0	Freshman	0
One	2	Sophomore	1
Two	0	Junior	2
Three	4	Senior	3

The second theme, *support*, contained three sub-themes. The first sub-theme was finances. Many participants voiced their surprise at the high cost of their degree. Participants also expressed frustration at the lack of support they received in exploring financial aid options. As Paul mentioned, concerning scholarship availability, "Nobody, and I mean nobody, told me how to do any of that. I had to figure that out on my own." Another common complaint was the lack of scholarships available for non-traditional students. Most participants simply took out loans to pay for their education. As Priscilla remarked, "I just took out student loans…after I complete my degree it will be financially hindering." Another sub-theme was technology. All participants mentioned struggling to adapt to the technology used in today's classrooms. For some it was the first time they had used a computer, and many did not know how to type. Leah stated, "I am still really struggling…I miss assignments…had to redo it and redo it. Yeah, I am not good with computer stuff." Priscilla voiced another common frustration, saying, "They just kinda assume you all know how to work it."

The final sub-theme was services. Many individuals felt that class schedules needed to be more flexible and include more on-line course offerings to meet their scheduling needs. Another need mentioned was that of counselors specifically for non-traditional students. "Maybe have a non-traditional program, or office, or administrator, advocate..." as suggested by Paul, was touched upon by all participants. Finally, several participants mentioned the need for better family housing options and daycare on campus. Evening care for children was mentioned so that non-traditional students could attend study groups and student activities. Once again, several participants mentioned positives that resulted from these barriers such as learning new skills and improving their problem-solving abilities.

The third theme, *generational gaps*, contained two sub-themes. The first sub-theme was life experience. Most participants felt they had a different perspective on school and how it fit into their lives. Tyler touched on this saying, "When you are a non-traditional student you start to think more about how school fits into your life rather than how you fit into school." Participants also voiced the feeling that they had a better understanding of their life path and were more mature than most traditional students. Priscilla echoed participants' feelings of taking things more seriously by stating, "I take my education probably way more serious…because I am paying for this, and it

matters." The feeling of an age-barrier was the second sub-theme identified. Many, such as Lee, mentioned having trouble relating to traditional aged students, "there is a weird barrier…how do you get along with like, people who are different ages?" Other common problems mentioned were not understanding the slang, social media use, and activities of traditional aged individuals. Many felt uncomfortable or out of place, often forcing themselves to fit in. As Tyler shared, "I'm kinda forced into the traditional student mold. It's just the uncomfortable factor of something I've had to deal with." The positive factors associated with these barriers included being forced out of their comfort zone and making friends with people they would not have encountered outside the university setting.

The final theme, *community*, also had two sub-themes. The first was that non-traditional students need a place of their own. All participants mentioned that, unlike traditional students, they had no "home" within the university. Traditional students had places such as dining halls, dorms, and common areas that they could access. However, non-traditional students did not have a place to meet together, hang out between classes, study, or eat. Paul commented, "There is no break room. I can't tell you how many times I did zoom in the back of my van.," and Leah, "…I really have nowhere to go [between classes]. I can bring my lunch, but it's going to sit in my car." A feeling of isolation was the second sub-theme. As Paul said, "…non-traditional students are looked at as kind of extras…I was the odd duck, if you will." This feeling of being unimportant, of not counting, was echoed by all participants. A number of participants felt invisible and secluded. A repeated sentiment was that non-traditional students had so much to contribute but were overlooked. Perhaps Tyler best expressed this when he said, "I'm just kind of a ghost here. Like I just come in, do my work, and then go. I don't really have the same attachment that a traditional student does."

DISCUSSION

The research indicates that non-traditional students face many barriers in their attempt to complete their degree. These students are more likely to experience additional stressors outside those normally involved with pursuing an undergraduate degree. Non-traditional students often find it difficult to find a balance between family, work, and school commitments. They also feel there is little support from the university that addresses their specific needs, especially in regard to class flexibility, financial aid support, childcare options, and help learning and understanding the requirements of technology used in classes. The research also indicates that non-traditional students experience a separation from traditional students due to their different perspectives on life as well as age related differences. A feeling of isolation and of being an outsider leads non-traditional students to perceive that they are an unimportant part of the university community. It is of interest that even when commenting on barriers that they thought to be negative, the non-traditional students tried to find positive factors, such as pride, in the way they overcame obstacles.

CONCLUSION

Non-traditional students experience specific barriers when trying to complete their degree program. These include stress related to their family, lack of support services from the university, a gap between themselves and traditional students, and a feeling of isolation from the university community. Providing support services specifically for non-traditional students and setting aside a space especially for them would be beneficial in helping them on their path to degree completion.

Future research may examine the effectiveness of programs already in place that address these barriers.

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APPENDIX A

1. What barriers and/or challenges have you experienced in college?
2. In what ways have barriers hindered your ability to complete your degree program?
3. In what ways have the challenges you've faced in college impacted your education (could be positive or negative)?
4. How might these challenges have been reduced?
6. As a non-traditional student what do you wish you could ask or suggest to your instructors?
7. As a non-traditional student what do you wish you could ask or suggest to administration?
7. What factors outside of the university setting help or hinder your ability to complete your degree program?
8. What else would you like me to know about your experience as a first-generation college student?