Nontraditional Students’ Perspectives on College Education: A Qualitative Study

Ruth Chao and Glenn E. Good

This study explored nontraditional college students’ perspectives on their college education. Forty-three undergraduate students with an average age of 38 years completed 60-minute structured interviews. Qualitative research methodology based on grounded theory was used in data synthesis. Results identified the central concept of hopefulness, which interacted with 5 other themes: (a) motivation, (b) financial investment, (c) career development, (d) life transition, and (e) support systems. Implications for counseling practice and future research are discussed.

The number of college students age 25 years and older has grown from fewer than 4 million in 1980 to more than 6 million in 2000. Nontraditional students now make up more than 40% of the total U.S. undergraduate population (National Center for Education Statistics, 1997; U.S. Census Bureau, 2001). Despite this rapid growth, few scholars have given nontraditional students much attention. The little research that has been done has focused primarily on variables related to academic attainment, comparing traditional college students with nontraditional students in terms of their motivations, aptitudes (Kasworm, 1990), learning processes (Smith & Pourchot, 1998), and classroom instruction and learning styles (Justice & Dornan, 2001). Unfortunately, this limited research provides an unclear picture of nontraditional students. For example, nontraditional students have been found to perform similarly to their traditional counterparts across several areas (Graham, 1998) and to perform equal to or better than their traditional counterparts based on grades and aptitude/content test results (Kasworm, 1990), yet they have also been found to lack confidence (Cupp, 1991).

Very little research has investigated the counseling needs of nontraditional students. In fact, the profession has not yet clearly identified the reasons that nontraditional students return to college nor adequately described their perspectives of the college experience (Justice & Dornan, 2001; Kroth & Boverie, 2000). Such information would be useful for counseling professionals to better meet the needs of nontraditional students, who frequently balance course work, employment, and family life as they create new vocational goals and cope with major life transitions. Just as counselors work to provide services that are appropriate for diverse client populations, such as people from different cultural backgrounds, they also need to recognize nontraditional students’ issues that set them apart from traditional-age students.

To better understand the counseling needs of nontraditional students, researchers and counselors should begin by listening to students’ firsthand experiences. Accurate knowledge of nontraditional students’ issues can enable counselors to...
effectively advocate for them, making professional services more relevant to their specific needs in personal, vocational, and educational areas. For this and other reasons, Luzzo (1999) has suggested that qualitative research is required to more intimately understand nontraditional students and their complex life roles across family, school, and the workplace.

Therefore, to extend earlier research and to provide practical suggestions for counselors, a qualitative examination of nontraditional students' experiences was conducted using grounded theory methodology. According to Strauss and Corbin (1998), grounded theory is "derived from data, systematically gathered and analyzed through the research process . . . theory emerge from data" (p. 12). Using this methodology, the current study explored nontraditional students' reasons for pursuing college education and how college education affects them, their support systems, and their career goals.

Method

Participants and Procedure

Participants were 43 nontraditional-age undergraduate students (23 women and 20 men) at a large public university and a moderate-size private college in the Midwest. Participants had a mean age of 37.69 years ($SD = 8.43$), with a range of 26 to 62 years. Thirty-four participants were Caucasian/White, 5 were Latino, and 4 were African American. Forty were attending evening programs, and 3 were attending day programs; 36 were full-time students and 7 were part-time, with most participants reporting that they expected to graduate within 2 years. Prior to returning to college, they were employed an average of 18.85 years ($SD = 7.64$), with a range of 7 to 40 years. Participants were recruited by flyers and class announcements and received $5 gift certificates as compensation. We (two advanced doctoral students) served as interviewers, with interviews lasting approximately 60 minutes. Interviews were audiotaped and transcribed for subsequent analyses.

Our interviews used grounded theory procedures first proposed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and later expanded by Strauss and Corbin (1998). For example, we established rapport with each interviewee in a nonreactive and nonjudgmental way, and with a series of probes, we encouraged interviewees to elaborate on their responses to the interview questions. (The specific interview protocol is available from the first author.)

Data Analysis

Consistent with grounded theory analysis methods (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), data were systematically analyzed in sequential stages. Concepts were coded, categorized, and synthesized to yield meaningfully interrelated constructs.

Concept coding. Concepts are "the building block of theory" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 101). In grounded theory, coding is an analytical process whereby researchers discover concepts. The transcribed interview data were broken down into concrete parts. We and another advanced doctoral student discussed the
concepts thus discovered, eliminated duplicates, and created a list that covered all concepts derived from transcripts.

**Category generation.** Each category reflects the meaning of several concepts to become a higher level concept. After concept coding, the researchers (the authors of this article and an advanced doctoral student) categorized concepts by reading the transcripts and their concept lists to find interrelationships among concepts and to name phenomena with interrelated concepts (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The researchers then reviewed the list of categories, eliminated duplicates, and ensured that each concept was in at least one category. The process resulted in the final category list.

**Axial coding.** In this stage, researchers clarified the relations among categories to lead to the generation of key categories. During the process, the researchers reexamined the key categories, categories, and concepts to make sure that each concept was fitted in a key category, and each key category was composed of a group of interrelated categories (each category has a few related concepts). Auditing is an essential step in grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). An advanced doctoral student (the first author) and a doctoral-level researcher served as auditors, verifying the fit between concepts and corresponding key categories and making appropriate adjustments as necessary. To accurately retrieve raw data, concepts, and key categories, each transcript was coded into QSR N5@ (QSR International, 1999), a program designed to yield a list of concepts, categories, and corresponding raw data.

After verifying the fit between concepts and key categories, the researchers generated relationships among key categories. In this study, a single key category emerged that most clearly represented participants’ core experience and perspectives on their pursuit of college education. To ensure that the core key category and the preliminary model accurately reflected participants’ experiences, the researchers reread the transcripts and constructed participants’ major themes. Guided by these major themes and current literature, the researchers fine-tuned the model to fit participants’ perspectives.

**Results**

This qualitative study yielded a theoretical model of nontraditional college students’ perspectives on college education. As depicted in Figure 1, participants’ perceptions of pursuing college education resulted from dynamic interaction among several factors. Central to the interaction was a sense of hopefulness that participants held toward their decision, struggles, and perceptions about the future. This core category of hopefulness critically influenced five other themes: motivation, financial investment, career development, life transition, and support systems. Apparently due to their hopefulness, nontraditional students took active roles in managing their education, employment, family, and interpersonal relationships. These factors are described in greater detail as follows.

Hopefulness is defined by *Webster’s Dictionary* as “desire accompanied by expectation” (Guralnik, 1979, p. 679). In this context, hopefulness affects
how nontraditional students perceive themselves in many positive ways. Hopefulness reflects the belief that an individual can find pathways to desired goals and motivates him or her to use the pathways, for hopefulness serves to enhance positive emotions and well-being (Snyder, Rand, & Sigmon, 2002). Nontraditional students in this study reported that hopefulness motivated their efforts related to financial concerns, career development, relationships, and life transitions. Indeed, hopefulness provided the self-efficacy and resilience for them to believe they could overcome their difficulties in these five areas.

Although some studies have suggested that nontraditional students have poor study skills, low self-confidence, and fear of returning to school (e.g., Donaldson & Graham, 1999), such findings have overlooked that nontraditional students actively and positively incorporate their 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.

Many participants expressed high motivation to complete their college education. This motivation was reflected in participants' observations about the self-rewarding nature of college and the joy of learning and self-fulfillment. For example, two students proudly shared their excitement of being on the honor roll, and one student reported new motivation to apply to a law school after graduation. Many nontraditional students came back to school because it represented a financial investment. In many cases, their previous employment did not provide adequate
income. Hence, they sought their college education as a means of improving their financial situation in the future. As one 46-year-old participant described,

In America, you know... without 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 (Luzzo, 1999; Powell, 1999). Education or training has been one essential component valued by workplaces (Bridges, 1993). In this study, some people pursued college education because they “felt stuck with their current jobs.” Other participants intended to change career goals via college education. They saw their degrees 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 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 if I want to do more on my professional work, I need to get my degree.

Support systems were also very important. Family, friends, and academic professors were crucial components. Nontraditional students’ decision to pursue more education affected their relationships with family, friends, and others. Their commitment to the student role motivated them to negotiate their work, family responsibility, and interpersonal relationships to achieve their goal in completing 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.

Some nontraditional students came back to school mainly due to life transitions, such as recent physical disability, divorce, or redefining long-term life goals. Nontraditional students pursue college education to respond to work or life transitions that are different from those of traditional-age students (Donaldson & Graham, 1999). These life transitions force them to change to different jobs, like one 43-year-old student who said,

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 college education.

Other participants mentioned how their 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 college education would be the first step.
For these students, further education "opens up a new world" for them because college education promises them new expertise, knowledge, and skills.

In sum, nontraditional students were found to actively incorporate their diverse resources from family, friends, teachers, and themselves to solve their difficulties in pursuing college education. Many students expressed self-appreciation for their decision, which has also earned them respect and admiration from others. These external and internal rewards strengthened their hopefulness in pursuing college education. Their hopefulness interacted with five major themes—motivation, financial investment, career development, life transition, and support systems—to shape their perspectives on higher education and to help promote their success in that environment. The results also demonstrated that nontraditional students have unique ways of integrating their complex life and work experiences and classroom learning into a comprehensive learning activity (Donaldson & Graham, 1999). In this study, nontraditional students reported connecting their new learning with their existing real-life experiences (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999), yielding new meanings for their current situations (Kasworm, 1993) and thereby preparing themselves for new career goals (Frost, 1991).

**Discussion**

This study used qualitative research methodology based on grounded theory to identify nontraditional students' reasons for being in college and their perceptions of their experiences in college. The findings revealed that an overall sense of hopefulness interacted with five specific themes of motivation, financial investment, career development, life transition, and social systems. The nontraditional college students in this study also indicated that broadening their internal resources (e.g., self-efficacy, hopefulness, resilience, motivation, and positive emotions) and external resources (e.g., academic resources, professors' support, classroom discussions) enhanced their learning and their subjective experiences of being students. Nontraditional students in this study had unique ways of interweaving their complex life, work experiences, and classroom learning into a comprehensive learning activity. They developed their individual meanings out of existing situations by connecting their learning to their real-life experience, thereby preparing themselves for new career goals in the future.

A related characteristic of many nontraditional students became evident in the results: A close connection between their educational and career goals was very apparent, much more so than with traditional-age students. Many nontraditional students reported that they viewed education as an opportunity to shift to a different occupation. This close connection between educational and career aspirations underscores the importance of vocational/career counseling with nontraditional students. However, most previous writing has failed to individualize vocational counseling to suit nontraditional students' struggles to match their career aspirations with their educational experiences. Understanding the travails and aspirations of nontraditional students during their career and educational transitions is therefore crucial for counselors to facilitate student success.
Another finding from the present study is that nontraditional students decided to pursue additional education partly based on their social context and familial expectations. Counselors should therefore consider involving family members and significant others in their work with nontraditional students. At the very least, counselors should actively solicit information about the multiple external factors that affect nontraditional students’ presenting concerns and draw on external support and resources to the extent possible.

College counselors need to keep in mind that many nontraditional students have recently experienced major life transitions, which influenced their decision to pursue higher education. Career transitions can be a source of stress, particularly if those transitions are motivated by adverse circumstances such as recent divorce, relocation, or changes in employment conditions. Counselors who incorporate this broader context into their evaluations and interventions will more likely match the needs of nontraditional students coping with the transition.

In presenting these findings and recommendations, it should be noted that the results of this study are limited by the size and nature of the sample used (i.e., studies in other geographic regions or with participants from other ethnic backgrounds might yield different interpretations). Future investigations should examine the potential influences of culture, gender, and social class in the experiences of nontraditional students. In addition, future research may investigate the salience and generalizability of the findings presented here using larger samples and quantitative methodologies (cf. Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

In summary, although many counselors have been working effectively with traditional college students, college counselors can do a better job of contextualizing their services for nontraditional students (Luzzo, 1999). College counselors may need to increase their outreach efforts to nontraditional students via services tailored to their unique needs and multiple roles at school, home, and work. Counselors can advertise services provided at convenient times that will help nontraditional students manage their time, make use of existing resources and seek out additional ones, and facilitate integration of their real-life experience with classroom learning. College counselors should also seek to combine personal and vocational services, working toward the creation of a postcollege career plan that complements new knowledge and skills gained in college. To be truly beneficial, such modifications of counseling practice require an in-depth understanding of nontraditional students’ distinct experiences and perspectives, and, to that end, the results of this study serve as a catalyst for further inquiry and for innovation.

References


