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**Factors Positively Influencing Persistence and Program Completion for
Nontraditional Students Enrolled at a For-Profit Postsecondary Institution
By**

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Factors Positively Influencing Persistence and Program Completion for Nontraditional Students Enrolled at a For-Profit Postsecondary Institution

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Abstract

This dissertation study seeks to explore what nontraditional students attending for-profit postsecondary institutions need to persist to graduation. This mixed-methods, case study with ethnographic qualities will examine the struggles nontraditional students face. For-profit colleges across the United States enroll approximately 73 percent (73%) of nontraditional students (Deming, Goldin, & Katz, 2013); research focusing on nontraditional students at these schools is limited. With for-profit schools facing high attrition rates which then effect school closure rates, learning more about this type of student will benefit both the students themselves and the for-profit industry.

Aim

The research provides an overview for a dissertation study awaiting IRB approval that explores the factors that nontraditional students attending for-profit postsecondary institutions need in order to persist to graduation. The aim of this mixed-methods case study approach with ethnographic qualities is to examine and understand the struggles nontraditional students face and what they feel would or do help them succeed at a for-profit college.

Problem

Non-traditional college students at for-profit post-secondary institutions experience significant challenges that frequently hinder successful program completion and graduation. Although most programs at for-profit schools have a planned curriculum duration of two years or less, on average, non-traditional students take five to six years to complete (Bell, 2012); and according to a “Fast” (2016) report, only 32 percent (32%) of students enrolled graduate within six years. Retaining and graduating students is a serious issue for all sectors of higher education, but more so at for-profit schools because their primary student demographic is adults, who have special circumstances and learning needs (Ross-Gordon, 2011). Typically, these students are: (a) over the age of 24, (b) predominantly female, (c) many are the first in their family to go to college, and (d) frequently are single parents working and juggling the demands of home and school while trying to navigate an academic environment many have not been in for years (“Definitions,” 2016). Many of the challenges these nontraditional students face when trying to complete their programs at for-profit institutions lead them to drop out.

Literature That Informs The Planned Research

Several issues have been identified as possible reasons nontraditional students leave for-profit schools before completion. Barton and Donahue (2010) found that feeling unprepared led to attrition. Nontraditional learners have difficulties acclimating to new expectations and rules, are unfamiliar with institutional resources and may be too

intimidated to build rapport with teachers and classmates (Lawrence, 2000; Barton & Donahue, 2010). They are less likely to participate in class or ask questions out of fear of being perceived as stupid (Lawrence, 2000). Nontraditional learners also struggle with technology, while integrating computers, online portals or cloud-based learning can be beneficial, depending on the student's age, background and previous exposure to technology, these avenues may be intimidating for adult learners who not grow up with technology (Gordon, Quick & Lyons., 2009). These issues are exacerbated at for-profit schools with accelerated programs when students are not provided with appropriate transitional or support skills (Higgins, 2010).

For a majority of nontraditional students, the demands of school, work and personal life combined with a real or perceived lack of support can lead these students to believe that dropping out is the easiest solution (Ross-Gordon, 2011). Engle and Tinto (2008) found that most non-traditional students have low self-esteem based on previous failures, limited skills, and prior learning experiences; and are further hampered by negative feelings about their age and how long they have been out of school, and the lack of support systems. It is especially difficult for a nontraditional student to feel supported at home when they are the first in their family to go to college. Studies conducted by Lawrence (2000), Ross-Gordon (2011), O'Neill and Thomson (2013) and Perna (2016) all show a correlation between a nontraditional student's self-esteem and thoughts of dropping out of school. An additional issue contributing to attrition may be the lack of student resources offered by for-profit schools like day care centers, transportation help and teacher office hours as only \$3,000 of all of the school's profits being spent on the students themselves (Rubin, & Kazanjian, 2011; O'Malley, 2012). When all of these issues collide or become overwhelming, nontraditional learners typically leave school.

Informed by prior research, this study will examine and explore non-traditional students' perspectives on the academic and personal challenges that they face, factors that may lead to dropout, faculty importance and influence on students, and most importantly, programs they feel promote retention and graduation at for-profit colleges. According to the current literature, research about nontraditional students regarding struggles, retention and persistence has have primarily been focused on undergraduate and community colleges, thus this research can fill a significant void in the current climate of professional curricular practice at for-profit postsecondary institutions with a range of professional program certifications. When stakeholders can understand their students' needs, struggles, and wants, they will be better positioned to implement changes to enroll, sustain and graduate more students.

Proposed Study Design

Research Questions

1. How do nontraditional students differ from traditional college student populations?
2. What personal obstacles do adult-learners at for-profit schools feel compromise their ability to persist to graduation?
3. What role, if any, does faculty at a for-profit institution play in a nontraditional student's motivation to stay in school?

4. What institutional programs, if any, can for-profit schools offer its students to help them succeed?

Methodology

Using a mixed methods approach for this case study with ethnographic qualities will allow this researcher to collect data from more subjects who will provide more thorough answers and various perspectives in answering the study's research questions (Russ-Eft, & Preskill, 2009). This is a case study because it concentrates on one population in one location and this researcher has been immersed in their culture for nearly seven years, which makes this ethnographic as well because the subjects are being studied in their own environment (Creswell, 2006). A quantitative survey tool created from studies conducted by NCES, the University of Colorado and the National Alliance for Partnerships will be administered to all students (N= 42) participating in a classroom-based practical nursing program at the study site. The survey data will be entered and analyzed using SPSS to keep things organized, utilize various statistical tests and generate graphs. Qualitative interviews will subsequently be conducted with 15 students who volunteer to participate in the interview phase of the study. Interviews will be transcribed and coded based on pre-established and emergent codes associated with college persistence and success. Integration of the quantitative findings and qualitative findings will inform the conclusions of the study.

Implications

Currently there is a significant deficit in understanding the needs of nontraditional students, primarily in a for-profit setting. Because of this deficit, utilizing an exploratory mixed methods design has been chosen. This will allow the researcher to understand the variables utilizing quantitative surveys and then probing further via qualitative interviews. This research has the potential to implement procedures or components to the school to retain students to completion. This benefits the students by obtaining new skills, knowledge, degrees and employment opportunities; can benefit the workforce by hiring nontraditional students who were prepared properly; and can benefit the institution itself by increasing profits which can keep more schools open and help stakeholders funnel profits back into the schools, students and faculty. With so many for-profit postsecondary institutions closing because of revenue losses, this study has the potential to impact more than just those at the study site alone.

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Author Biography

Kristine (Kris) MacDonald, a native of Scranton, PA, earned her Masters of Science in Secondary Education from the University of Scranton and her Pennsylvania Teaching Certification in English for grades 7-12 in 2011. She received her Bachelor of Arts in Communications/Journalism specializing in print media from Shippensburg University in 2005. Ms. MacDonald has worked in secondary and higher education since 2011 with a variety of learners and school sectors including Valley View High School in Archbald, PA; the University of Scranton in Scranton, PA; tutored composition for Chegg.com and Tutor.com; and worked as a general education instructor at Fortis

Institute in Scranton, PA since 2011. While pursuing her Ed.D. in Educational Leadership and Management in Higher Education at Drexel University, she has had the opportunity to work with the Philadelphia Educational Research Consortium creating curriculum and assessments to better calibrate pedagogy and methodology for the English Language Learner students in the district's charter school. She is also an intern for the College of Education working to create an open-access online course on Scholarly Writing and APA Style. She has also accepted opportunities to present her research through the PASA Inaugural Education Research Symposium, Drexel University Doctoral Colloquium, at the CARE Conference in Las Vegas, NV, and the INTED 2017 Conference in Spain. She has also edited a published, fictional novel written by a fellow classmate. She has successfully defended her doctoral proposal and is currently awaiting IRB approval. After graduating, she hopes to work in curriculum and instructional design in higher education. In her spare time, she enjoys spending time with her German Shepherd.