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Hiding in Plain Sight: Higher Education Pink and Blue Collar Staff Experiences as Returning Adult Learners, Workers, and Family Members

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Abstract: This study focuses upon a sometimes invisible subset of adult learners: higher education staff members. The participant interviews are part of a pilot study intended to create increased understanding of how these unique adult learners experience their environments. This paper focuses upon one central work/school theme, 'knowing your place'.

Introduction

This paper presents initial data from a pilot qualitative research study whose questions are adapted from Hart's (2006) application of Huberman and Miles (1984) discussion of qualitative research. It seeks to describe what happens in a particular setting, why and how it happens, and what the implications of understanding the situation are for change. Using these foundational questions, we describe and analyze the experiences of higher education staff ranging from maintenance/janitorial, clerical, to mid-level professional staff, who are also current or recent part-time adult students at the educational institutions where they work.

The underlying research premise is that higher education staff work in institutional environments that communicate and place a high value on post-secondary formal education. In fact, many U.S.-based higher education institutions have employee policies in place to support free or reduced-cost opportunities for furthering their educations. Yet the same institutional cultures that encourage beginning or furthering formal education can simultaneously be intense environments in terms of maintaining distinct working and professional class hierarchies. Moreover, these categories of employment are normally disproportionately gender and race segregated (more women and minorities) than professional staff and faculty categories of university employment.

One former university staff member (Stockton, 2001) wrote about her experiences:

Yet one of the most valuable resources a university can have, its staff, is often overlooked, unrecognized, and undervalued. Staff members are not faculty members, who have reached the finish line of higher education and are in the winner's circle, they are not students, who are at the starting gate. They are somewhere in between, providing the resources to hold the race at all. (p. b5)

Educational support staff members, acting upon the perceived currency of knowledge or degree attainment, often decide to become part-time adult learners at the universities or schools where they work in the hopes of improving career mobility and also improving their value within the work environment of higher education.

In doing so, staff members experience complex challenges in terms of balancing multiple and overlapping roles as support staff who also happen to be learners. Many begin or return to school hoping to improve their job or career mobility and subsequently face unanticipated and uncertain career pathways and varying degrees of co-worker or institutional support, especially if they are already tracked or labeled as pink or blue collar workers. In addition, working-class employees may also face personal challenges in navigating evolving or changing personal identities and family dynamics while returning or entering school (Kasworm, 1990). Studies show that working class students are likely to engage in social replication, meaning that their educational experiences do not lead them to move upward through social classes, rather they continue to set educational, career and other aspirations based upon working class pathways (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Walpole, 1997). Cohen (1998) tracked mature working class women students who were admitted into a special study program at Smith College, and found that participants chose service and activism as opposed to career mobility as a way of redefining and bridging the sociocultural perspective gaps they experienced while adult learners.

Overall estimates show that adult learner college enrollments are growing exponentially, with 7.1 million adult students estimated to enroll by the year 2010 (Aslanian, 2001). Adult learners, in general, experience anxiousness or stress and identity shifts associated with attending college (Kasworm, Sandmann & Sissel, 2000). We could not identify existing research specifically focused on how higher education workers experience working and learning at the same institutions.

Research Design

When higher education staff members become adult learners in their own work environments, what do we know about their experiences as learners, workers, and family members? What can we, as university community members who participate in shaping these environments and who study adult learning and critical issues of race, class, and gender, learn about ourselves in the process of understanding the experiences of those who work and study side by side with us?

The research design includes analysis and presentation of data derived from the pilot phase of a larger study. The larger study design includes a series of four face-to-face interviews with 40 participants drawn from four university settings. The pilot phase includes the first fifteen interviews from two institutions, one research extensive in the Northeast and one liberal arts comprehensive in the Southeast. The interviews were semi-structured, exploring foundational questions about the participants decision to work for higher education institutions and then to also study as adult learners. While the larger study explores the intersection of work, school and family, this pilot focuses on the participant perspectives of navigating work and school. To that end, the findings and discussion focus on the most prevalent theme that emerged from the pilot data: ‘knowing your place’.

Participant Profiles

The participants ranged in age from 29 to 57, with all but three married with children. The ratio of female/male participants is consistent with the male/female ratio represented within the job categories, with thirteen females and two males in the pilot group. The participant jobs spanned maintenance/janitorial, receptionist, customer service clerk, bookkeeping, secretarial, to

a few mid-level administrators. All participants were full-time workers with health insurance, paid leave, and retirement benefits. Their annual salaries (calculations based upon average salary grade ranges) ranged from \$16,000 to over \$50,000 per year, with an average salary of approximately \$26,000 per year. Two participants had a parent who had studied in college; all others came from family backgrounds where education and professional positions were not the norm. Half of the participants took one three-credit course per semester (including summer) for a total of nine credits per year...the other half took six credits per semester and no summer coursework, for a total of twelve credits per year.

Findings

Only one participant expressed a concrete plan to intentionally become a university employee, and that person chose to seek out university employment in order to attain the educational tuition benefit. Nearly all participants described feeling encouraged by their parents to value education, but stated that the means or opportunity to pursue that goal was not necessarily immediately available. In principle, participants felt that their families placed a high value on higher education and attending college, even if they didn't specifically tie those principles to behaviors that would make education an immediate reality. Contrary to contemporary assumptions that young women seek out college education before starting families, more than two-thirds of the female participants reported that their desire to study or their completion of a first attempt at attending college was interrupted or delayed by getting married and starting a family.

As the participants wound their way through jobs and eventually became university workers, they arrived at decision points where they wanted to go to school. The impetus to become adult learners was, in fact, heightened by working in educational environments, although it was not necessarily the only influence. Similar to Bash (2003), participants all reported a pivotal person or event that led them to school. For a few, a divorce or major job or life change prompted them to reevaluate and become students. For most, the influence was no less powerful but perhaps more subtle – a co-worker or acquaintance who repeatedly encouraged them to consider furthering their education, or who provided information or details that made it seem feasible. Or, they made their own observations of the doors that were opened to co-workers who held higher degrees and conversations with those co-workers about how their school experiences. One female participant in her mid-40s recounts:

I wouldn't have set it as a goal or gotten through my first classes without 'Cheryl', a former co-worker who kept encouraging me...she told me I was smart and that a lot of people assumed I had a degree already because of how I carried myself and spoke...she told me that everyone has to learn how to learn and I could do it too...she gave me catalogs and information on degree programs with deadlines circled...and when I started my first class, she got a copy of my syllabus and read the readings alongside me and helped me to study, write my papers, and prepare for class...ironically she is now a stay-at-home mom and isn't working here anymore.

The Importance of Knowing your Place

With the exception of three participants, all participants were tied to what one might expect in staff positions: precise work schedules with scheduled breaks, and supervisory approvals necessary for any changes to scheduled work times and work flow. This is not surprising. But the immediacy of offered classes and the educational enterprise going on around staff members meant that access usually didn't involve identifying daycare or parking, or finding

their way around a new campus. It involved navigating permission to take lunchtime classes across the hall or to leave work early to attend a late afternoon/early evening class. It involved walking into a student service area and being recognized as a student in need of services, rather than as an employee there for other reasons. It involved being served as opposed to serving others. It involved stepping outside of an 'invisible' support role and visibly interacting from a place or role (student) with the same people in the same environment. The idea of not being able to be anonymous because you already had a pre-defined role on campus was an emotional experience with both ups and downs. There was the excitement of being heard, of being asked "What do you think?" and of having one-on-one conversations with faculty, students or higher ranking staff that normally didn't interact with you, or interact in that way. There was an excitement of being able to demonstrate or show, "Hey look at me – I'm smart too and I am doing what is important here".

Kellie, a 15-year employee who first completed her associates degree, then bachelors, and was taking graduate courses, said that it was almost addictive and the addiction was part of the reason she kept continuing on when each program of study was complete, even though she hadn't changed jobs in over ten years. She said that for her, "being recognized and having a 'place at the table' had a status reward that was very important to her and one that didn't seem available otherwise". As a student in an institution where students and faculty members are clearly the most important people, she said that being a student gave her a sense of worth that didn't seem otherwise available. She looked forward to class discussions and to office hours to talks with other students, because they were interacting with one another in a way that suspended the constraints she felt as a support staff member. She felt that she had developed new relationships with higher ranking staff or faculty that carried over to her overall credibility and status. Two other participants echoed Kellie's description, and felt that the strong 'pull' wasn't towards learning per se, it was the combination of learning and increased status that propelled them into continuing on. In Kellie's words: "without formal education, in this environment, you are nothing, you might as well be invisible...my choices are to accept being invisible, get the credentials, or change jobs outside of higher ed." All three stated that they knew they had clearly outgrown their current jobs, but wanted to complete their graduate studies before they were willing to change positions.

On the downside, many of the participants described how hard it was for them to go back inside that box and stay within the employee role. They described internal dialogues where 'knowing your place' was the predominant issue that created stress or perceived negative reactions from co-workers. Their changing definitions of work and being working professionals (regardless of rank) meant that previously tolerable working processes or conditions felt constraining or unreasonable. Even those who had supportive co-workers and environments talked about the conscious ongoing effort it took for them to change roles in the same place, same day, and sometimes with the same people. The participant description of this process was vivid and a predominant issue worth further analysis and exploration. Nearly three-quarters of the participants stated that they had made an internal job change –either changing supervisors, passing up a promotion, or switching jobs altogether, in order to align themselves with someone who would afford a small amount of flexibility in their schedule or environment or someone who was simply verbally supportive of what they were doing.

None of the participants interviewed were able to fully describe the educational policies at their institutions – all knew generally (and accessed) the partial tuition waivers. But the other policies regarding how many credits a full-time employee could pursue per semester and how

‘supervisor discretion’ was defined for approvals to schedule changes, increases in library privileges, and research leaves-of-absence were inconsistently recounted, or not known. All participants were appreciative of the tuition waiver benefit and the opportunity it offered. However, many participants described the frustration involved with their experience of stepping outside of the boundaries of their role as employee – that there was a ‘vibe’ of disapproval or skepticism about their taking something that wasn’t or isn’t rightfully available.

For some, supervisors tracked to the minute their absences and reprimanded them if they were as much as 5 minutes late in returning from a break, tying the ‘lateness’ to their student status without asking why they were late. For others, they described supervisors looking for loopholes to ‘disapprove’ of classes taken during work time based upon their definition of its relation to current job duties. For example, a bookkeeping clerk was denied access to an accounting class because the supervisor said that the course syllabus covered principles that were currently not a part of the employee’s job duties, and stated that the course should be rightfully available to someone more ‘upwardly mobile’ who had more complex responsibilities in the office. Several participants described hiding their books or backpacks because they had been accused or were afraid of being accused of studying ‘on the clock’ and did not want to create the impression that they were ‘getting away with something’ on university time. On the other hand, two employees described their supervisors asking them if they needed help in studying and encouraging them to use slow times at work to catch up on reading or assignments or to share what they were learning in class with co-workers.

The participants who had recently completed their studies stated that they were wondering if promotional opportunities would come their way because they had already been tracked and were viewed as their ‘old selves’ and not as their new, more ‘knowledgeable selves.’ Three told detailed stories of being passed over for promotions yet having additional duties added to their current job responsibilities. One participant, Debbie, expressed frustration at being passed over for a promotion that specifically required the degree she had just attained, after acting as ‘interim’ in the vacant position...she was then asked to train the incoming new hire because they said ‘she knew the job inside and out’. When she questioned the hiring decision, she was told that her degree may hold the same weight but her previous experience at lower levels in the division meant that she wouldn’t have the same ‘status’ as a new hire from the outside. Only two participants stated that they were successful in garnering promotions or new trajectories in their immediate environments.

Conclusion

This paper reflects an initial analysis of a pilot round of interviews with fifteen higher education staff who are also adult learners. One of the strong emerging themes for further study is the idea of roles – and how role boundaries (Clark, 2000; Eagle, Icenogle & Maes, 1998) influence their experiences. Many adult learner studies focus on changing identities (Kasworm, 2005) and certainly one could argue that shifting roles and identities are connected frameworks. Understanding the nature of shifting roles and identities when students are working where they study has the potential to highlight many of the societal assumptions that are at work.

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