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Overcoming Barriers to Persistence for First-Generation Adult Community College Students

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Introduction

The study sought to understand first-generation adult community college students' persistence strategies, their origins and development. The main research question, "What strategies do first-generation adult community college students employ to enable them to stay in college?" is addressed by exploring participant responses related to four sub-questions: (1) How are the strategies employed by first-generation adult community college students shaped? (2) What individual strategies do first-generation adult community college students employ to enable them to stay in college? (3) How do institutional characteristics interact with individual characteristics to influence persistence? (4) To what extent do practitioners' perspectives corroborate student reports of effective strategies? A qualitative design that incorporated a self-nominating survey, critical incident, interview, and engagement with a focus group provided a wealth of data that was coded and analyzed.

Findings

Data analysis revealed that strategies were shaped through interactions and experiences within the lifeworld (Habermas, 1987) and through experiences that fostered self-efficacy. Data analysis further revealed that students developed social-environmental and independent strategies, as well as institution-based strategies which included interactions with instructors and mentors, use of institution-provided academic supplements, and engagement with communities of practice.

Lifeworld Factors

Students reported that early educational experiences helped them to pattern current study strategies on those that worked during early learning. Family dynamics and interactions, as well as work and economic factors provided strategy-shaping models for persistence. Ascribed characteristics, such as first language, gender and adulthood itself influenced development of persistence strategies. Dropping out of college in the past affected some students' ability to turn past barriers into persistence strategies. Crises stimulated a reordering of priorities that reinvigorated the desire to make their lives better through education and fostered resilience.

Self-Efficacy

The "conviction that one can successfully execute the behavior to produce the outcomes desired" (Bandura, 1977, p. 79) and the belief that academic achievement is possible was a common theme for subjects. Participant comments indicated that students shaped persistence strategies based upon what led to mastery in the past, verbal reinforcement of learning behaviors, witnessing other successfully completing learning tasks, or positive feelings after successfully implementing strategies.

Social & Environmental Strategies

These strategies were developed as responses to others or to the immediate environment and included intentional postponement of college study, retreating from unsupportive family members, distancing from unsupportive friends, turning to prayer for support, and receiving tuition assistance and other work benefits, such as a cohort-based, company-sponsored program.

Independent Study Strategies

These strategies are the participants' reported methods of studying autonomously and were shaped by an awareness of their own styles and preferences. Independent study strategies included intentional choice of a college major, time management, and use of tried and true study methods, such as practice exercises and self-tests, notetaking, highlighting, outlining, SQ3R, and flash cards. Participants also stressed the importance of repetition as a persistence strategy.

Interactions with Instructors and Mentors

Participants sought caring instructors and mentors as a persistence strategy and characterized caring individuals as those willing to give up extra time, those who were approachable and responsive, and those who inspired passion for the subject and for learning. Participants also sought those whom they described as effective teachers because they communicated clearly and intuitively sensed students' needs. Students also persisted by avoiding those teachers and mentors who did not display these characteristics.

Intra-Institutional Factors

Three participants found use of the branch campus a persistence strategy. Students also used the library as a convenient place to study and used the learning center, seeking tutors for courses they found challenging, particularly mathematics.

Engagement with Communities of Practice

Communities of practice are organically-formed groups of individuals who join together for a common purpose (Wenger, 1998)—in this case, to seek knowledge and meaning in the context of the learning environment. Students in the study formed such groups and reported that the groups provided a feeling of belonging, as well as allowing them to test or affirm new knowledge, to fill in gaps in understanding, or to reveal insights that may have resided just beneath the surface of conscious comprehension.

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