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Men's Success in Higher Education: Model Building

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Abstract: This research addressed degree completion among adult male students. Findings illustrated that persistence depended on grit and a campus community where they could contribute and receive support to graduate.

Keywords: Undergraduate Education, Adult Education, and Qualitative Study

The campus environment is a critical factor in persistence for adult students. Research on the experience of adult students in higher education recommends that institutions can help adults overcome persistence barriers by providing supportive campus environments (Fincher, 2010; McGivney, 2004; Sandmann, 2010; Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005). Development theories provide the context surrounding the adult student experience in higher education and help to explain the process of situating the student role within a mature multifaceted identity. Kasworm (2014) questioned the assumption that increased on-campus engagement (e.g. living on campus or participating in extracurricular activities) will improved retention for adult students. "The voice and image of adult students are not integrated into the ethos of the campus" (Sissel, Hansman, & Kasworm, 2001, p. 20)

The majority of adults returning to college are experiencing significant life changes (Taylor, 1996). Male students are often overlooked in qualitative research about adult and nontraditional students with the exception of Smith (2006) and Widoff (1999). Smith (2006) identified the need to explore the "nontraditional student as a meaningful construct" instead of focusing "solely on the effects of gender" (p. 265).

This study explored factors that contributed to the persistence of undergraduate adult male students and their perception of their role within the campus community. The research question was: How do adult male undergraduate students who have achieve degree completion describe their relationship to the university? The significance of this study demonstrated the need to consider the role of institutional resources in supporting mutual engagement and degree completion for adult male students. It also increased the literature that looked at understanding of adult male students in the field of adult education.

Literature Review

Adult students maintain various life roles (e.g. family caretakers, employees, parent, and student) (Donaldson & Graham, 1999; Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011; Kasworm, 2003; Metzner & Bean, 1987; Taniguich & Kaufman, 2005). These multilayered identities shape their goals and motivations for postsecondary enrollment, and the transition of entering college can promote development. The Schlossberg (2011) transition model defines four factors also known as the "4 S" system for coping with transitions: situation, self, supports, and strategies. The strengths and weakness an individual possesses within each of the 4Ss influence how they cope with the transition and is applicable to adult student persistence. The responsibilities of work and family are examples of life events that represent the situation surrounding the transition of returning to school. Motivation and self-perception are important factors that appear in all models of adult student persistence (Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2004; Cross, 1981; Donaldson & Graham,

1999). These factors contribute to an individual's inner strength and affect their ability to persist in higher education. Support also plays a critical role in persistence (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011; Tinto, 1993, Wyatt, 2011). Support can come from outside the institution, as well as, the institution and its employees in the form of advising, childcare, counseling, faculty and staff interactions. Strategies, the final S, are important for degree completion, as adult students need a systematic plan that identifies the sequence of courses needed to graduate. Helping adult students articulate a goal and a manageable pathway to accomplishing that goal is imperative to their success (CAEL, 2005; Compton, Cox, & Laanan, 2006, McGivney, 2004).

Wyatt (2011) found, "successful interactions with staff and faculty most often resulted in a successful transition to college life for the nontraditional student" (p. 17). Prior experiences and attitudes toward education, external forces or responsibilities, motivation, self-efficacy, and the university environment are factors that affect persistence for adult students (Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2004; Cross, 1981; Donaldson & Graham, 1999). Tinto's (1975) landmark interactionist theory discussed the relationship between the student's belief structure and the norms of the academic and social system of the university. The stronger the relationship the more likely the student will assimilate and remain enrolled until graduation. Other research studies indicated that social integration is not possible for adult students given their limited time on campus so the classroom is the epicenter of key interactions for adult students (Donaldson & Graham, 1999; Kasworm, 2003, Price & Baker, 2012). Research on the experience of adult students in higher education recommends that institutions can help adults overcome persistence barriers by providing supportive campus environments (Fincher, 2010; McGivney, 2004; Sandmann, 2010; Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005). Supports include policies that meet the needs of adult students, evening and online classes, and accessible support services with staff trained to work with adult learners (Fincher, 2010, Sandmann, 2010, Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005). As a result, there is a need to explore the adult male student's perception of the campus community and how social interactions influence persistence.

Method

This study used a theory-building case study to investigate the adult male experience in higher education. The research setting was an urban public four-year institution. The following criteria were used to select participants: male, age 25 or older at the time of graduation, and a baccalaureate degree earned within the last five years. Semi-structured interviews were the main source of data collection for this study. These interviews were conducted with nine participants. Eight participants identified as Caucasian and one as African American. They ranged in age from 26 to 52 at the time of their graduation. The constant comparative method including grounded theory was used to analyze the data and build the resulting model. Halaweh (2012) suggested using constant comparative analysis with a theory building case study approach.

Findings

Two themes emerged in response to the research question. The first theme is position with subthemes of belong, indifferent, excluded. The second theme is validation of status with subthemes of contribution and application.

Position. All the participants used campus resources and interacted with individuals on campus, but these connections did not foster a sense of belonging to the campus community. Two of the older participants discussed feeling excluded from the university community, which

negatively influenced their experience as a student but did not prevent them from continuing. One of the youngest participants said he felt connected to the campus community, and six participants are situated in middle because they were indifferent about the need to be part of the larger campus community. The two ends of the continuum reflect the participants' age gap as the older participants felt excluded. Jerry (age 38) said, *"Yeah some of the different professional fraternities or other groups they all have maximum age limits so that makes you feel excluded."* One of the youngest participants, John (age 26) felt that he belonged to the university. He shared, *"I mean I don't think I ever felt like I didn't fit in...as an adult I felt comfortable. I didn't feel out of my element."* Six participants did not have a sense of their place within the university community. Brian (age 27) said, *"Really to me the campus was just a place I go to learn and get a degree. That was really it for me. I need to learn. I need to develop my skills in computer science so it's like I looked at campus as resource to improve myself."*

Age, the value that the participants placed on their membership within the campus community, and university policies influenced how they described their place within the campus community. Although all the participants were considered adult students, their experiences differed depending on age and non-traditional status. Despite variations, their position did not influence persistence. All of the participants were able to graduate regardless of their feelings of belonging, indifference, or exclusion. In addition, all of the men participated in at least one traditional engagement activity (e.g. interacting with other students, faculty, and staff, using resources, and joining clubs and organizations) but that did not foster a sense of belonging to the campus community.

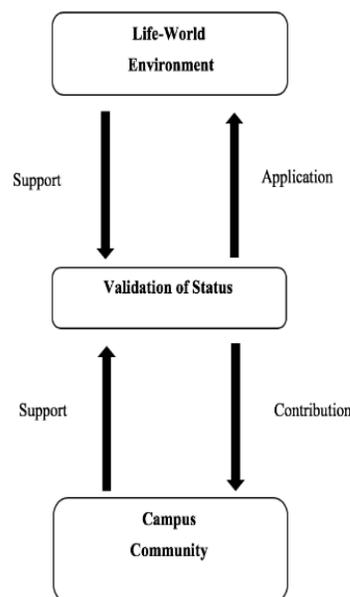
Validation of Status. The concept of validation of status emerged through the participants' stories about how contributing to the campus community and applying knowledge learned within the institution to the life-world environment made them feel connected to the campus community. As a result, the two subthemes are contribution and application. These themes were used to construct a model that could illustrate the key elements that are important in adult male student persistence.

The participants felt connected to the university when they were able to contribute. Engaging in campus activities as students did not connect them to the campus community. Their connection to the university was embedded in stories about helping another students or participating in a panel discussion. In fact, being able to contribute validated their status as a student because they mattered to the larger group; confirmation that what they brought to the community was valued. Steve worked as a nurse's aide at a local hospital while attending college. During clinical rotations for class, a particular instructor encouraged Steve to share his knowledge. He explained, *"She would incorporate what I knew from working as an aide, about the monitors and equipment and things of that nature. She gave a great environment for everyone to teach each other as opposed to a top down approach."* Making a contribution to the class empowered Steve and connected him to the larger community. Jerry had an interesting experience, he felt excluded when he was a student but as an alumnus felt connected to the campus community. After graduation, he was asked to participate in various panel discussions on campus. He said, *"I think I actually feel like I belonged more post-graduation then when I was there especially with the way I was celebrated for being a successful graduate. I feel like I have more to contribute."* Most of the participants did not see themselves as are part of the campus community, but they felt connected when they were able to contribute. The participants desired a reciprocal relationship with the campus community.

The concept of mattering is twofold. It is not only cultivated by contribution, but also the application of the knowledge gained as a student to the outside world. Adult students do not fully integrate into the campus community and maintain membership in the life-world environment. Connecting the two communities validated their role within the campus community because their work within the classroom had purpose in their life-world environment. Mike talked about a faculty member who allowed him to do a presentation on nonprofit entities that helped him in his career. *“She allowed me to do a presentation on turning my company into a nonprofit... I am still using that research in trying to determine if I am going to turn it into a nonprofit or not.”*

Campus Membership Model

Unlike the experience of traditional age students, belonging is not a full integration into the campus community by way of leaving the life-world environment. The campus membership model explains how the adult male students’ involvement in the campus community and the life-world environment validates their status as a student. The validation process can be initiated by institutional agents or members of the life-world environment. The participants received support from both communities that validated their status as a student, so in the model there is an arrow pointing from each community to validation of status.



Campus Membership Model for Adult Male Students

There are also two arrows pointing outward from validation of status to the life-world environment and campus community to illustrate that validation occurs when a student is able to act upon those environments. Instead of receiving support and validation because of someone else’s actions, the participants’ actions also served to validate their student role. They were not just passively receiving validation but also actively creating it.

Discussion and Implications

The literature on adult students often indicates that adults do not have extra time to spend on campus interacting in the traditional sense (Donaldson & Graham, 1999; Kasworm, 2014).

The findings of this study show adult males do interact and are engaged, fostering a sense of connectedness. Most of the participants did not see themselves as part of the campus community, but felt connected because they could contribute through a reciprocal relationship with the campus community. They were looking for what they could give back, as well as what they would gain. Understanding how adult male students access resources and engage in the campus community, will help higher education institutions make decisions about how to allocate resources and create structures that meet the needs of adult male students. The findings of this study demonstrate that creating an environment where adult male students feel as though they are contributing to the campus community could augment and perhaps replace traditional engagement.

Some of these activities occurred within the classroom, which supports the connecting classroom element of the model of college outcomes for adults. Donaldson and Graham (1999) and Kasworm (2003) argued that the classroom is the center for learning and engagement for adult students. Incorporating an experiential model of learning in the classroom allows students to connect experiences and future applications with what they are learning in the classroom. Communities of Practice (CoP), (Kriner, Coffman, Adkisson, Putman & Monaghan, 2015) used as an educational tool, creates an environment where students can plan and implement their own learning. The CoP allows students to be self-directed, follow their interest, and contribute to a collaborative learning environment. This allows students to apply previous experiences to the learning process and apply new knowledge to the life world environment while contributing to the learning of their peers.

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