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Susan J. Barcinas  
North Carolina State University at Raleigh, susan_barcinas@ncsu.edu

Tracy A. Kachur  
North Carolina State University at Raleigh, takachur@ncsu.edu

Duane Akroyd  
North Carolina State University at Raleigh, hdakroyd@ncsu.edu

Heidi N. McCann  
North Carolina State University at Raleigh, hnmccann@ncsu.edu

Yaxin Zheng  
North Carolina State University at Raleigh, yzheng11@ncsu.edu

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Adult Learner Perceptions and Experiences in a Community College Engaged in Intensive Student Success Reforms

Susan J. Barcinas, Tracy A. Kachur, Duane Akroyd, and Heidi Noelle McCann
North Carolina State University

Abstract: This qualitative case study focuses upon the perceptions of community college students who are studying at a community college that has gone through an intensive institutional change focused upon student success.

Keywords: adult learners, community colleges, student success, institutional change

Literature Review

Nationally, there are 1,123 community colleges whose students represent 46% of the undergraduate population and the average student age is 28 years old (American Association of Community Colleges, 2015). Over the past several years increasing urgency has built around the notion that community colleges are in need of major reform. These reform efforts have been well underway with high profile formal initiatives such as The Aspen Institute for Excellence in Community Colleges, Achieving the Dream, or Completion by Design, and a plethora of informal or independent community college efforts.

According to Boggs (2011), “Community college students are more likely to be first-generation college students and less prepared for college; have a gap between high school graduation and college attendance; be place-bound, minority, female, less economically advantaged, working at least part-time; and not dependent on parents for financial support” (p.9).

An adult learner brings prior “real world’ experiences that are perceptions of how they will do in college, their perceptions of themselves, their classroom expectations and their knowledge, they are focus on achieving direct benefits from college coursework. They rely on their prior experiences in order to make sense of their learning, and they are often self-directed in their learning (Graham, Donaldson, Kasworm, & Dirkx, 2000). There are risk factors that hinder adult learner persistence, including, but not limited to part-time enrollment status, family and dependent responsibilities, work commitments, limited financial support, first-generation college student, a break from formal education, underprepared or unpracticed academic skills and knowledge, lower socioeconomic backgrounds, lack of family and peer support, and lower accumulative college course hours (Kasworm, 2014).

Given the vast number of adult learners who attend community college, the literature has considered several aspects within the adult learner demographic. Kasworm’s (2005) study provides a view of the adult learner construct positional and relational identities that relate to their experiences within the intergenerational community college classroom. Peterson, (2015) studies the success and persistence of non-traditional learner parent who are enrolled at community colleges. Many other researchers research various student characteristics and experiences (Acevedo-Gil, N., Santos, R. E., Alonso, L., & Solorzano, D.G., 2015; Heeler, 2012; Rendon, 1995; Wood and Turner 2011). The community college student is a unique individual for whom generalizations and a one-size-fits-all experience doesn’t make sense.

Method

This research is part of a long-term instrumental case study (Stake, 1994). The research
question is: How do traditional and adult learners in a mid-sized community college perceive their experiences in light of their community college’s recent focus on improving student success in a widespread institutional initiative? Students were asked to share their stories about their student experiences and perceptions of the supports and challenges to their studies in relation to the college mission and student success priorities. Data collection included a 200 hour observational phase in order to investigate institutional context, taking place in various public spaces and open meetings. Data collection included 4 focus groups with three to four students, followed by 74 community college students in face-to-face semi-structured one hour interviews. The students represented a variety of backgrounds in terms of demographics and part-time/full-time student or study areas. Documentation such as reports, working documents, website materials, public materials, and public data warehouse information was also included in the analysis. The data analysis included multiple iterative phases of both open coding and framework coding. The framework for data analysis was a juxtaposition of the Aspen Institute for Excellence in Community Colleges suggested four priorities for excellence and student success – Completion, Learning, Equity, and Labor Market Outcomes with Saldana’s suggested verbal exchange coding structure. (Aspen, 2013; Saldana, 2009).

Research Site

The study site is a mid-sized southeastern community college in a rural county which is within commuting distance of a major metropolitan area. They have approximately 300 faculty members, 68% full-time and 32% full-time. There are nearly 15,000 credit and non-credit students, studying in more than 40 curriculum and 500 short-term continuing education or workforce programs and courses. Five years ago, the institution made a commitment to undergo a process of institutional reform to re-organize. They focused upon making the student experience as successful, from start to finish, emphasizing that the entire college personnel, regardless of function, area, or role, has one job: to serve students well and to facilitate learning. They have integrated credit and noncredit areas and personnel; re-organized student onboarding, advising, and tracking, and business services; created flexible guided pathways to assist students in navigating choices as well as setting goals; and increased their use of multiple measures, creative policy adaptation, and targeted institutional research.

Discussion of Findings

Everybody is on The Same Page: Learning!

Notably, participants in the study spoke of being in an environment which valued learning, and what a difference it made in their own learning experience and persistence. Even though the institution had recently gone through a reorganization that included a predominant and vigorous discourse on the shared goal of learning, most participants were removed from that change process. It was by far the most powerful message in hundreds of hours of data – being on the same page makes a difference to learners. It heightens their sense of purpose and relevancy, and it increases motivation and willingness to access support structures.

Kara, part-time degree student:

“Everyone I talk to here, they say how lucky they are to have the chance to learn. I didn’t expect that! I was talking to my mom one day and she reminded me that if I were going to school at a place where everyone expected to go to college, they wouldn’t see it as special, you know? I started paying attention. I am surrounded by people who don’t take getting an education for granted. They view the community college as an opportunity to become a better person.”
Sometimes they aren’t sure if they will be good at it, or have a bad day, but they never forget that they are doing something special. **We are all learning.**

Another participant talked about how he felt different than the other students because he already had strong academic preparation, and was just attending the community college to save money before transferring to a four-year university.

**Michael, full-time transfer student,**

“I expected to always have the top grade in the class…I thought for sure most of the students around me knew less than me. I guess in some ways that is true because I didn’t have to backtrack as much. Once my classes got harder, I began to realize…this is harder than I thought. The professors are better than I thought. And, the other students are smart just like me. I like being in projects with students who are older than me, have been out there a while. They teach me something about life. Maybe I take my family for granted, though don’t tell them I said that (laughing)…. Even the people who work there, they say hello, they smile and they ask me how I’m doing in my classes. I hope when I transfer that it is the same way and student success means that everybody around you is eager to learn.”

One of the things participants shared was that even if they were on a career and technical pathway, they were still interested in the bigger picture. The process of going to school meant they were also learning about life, growing as people, developing confidence and curiosity. They felt the atmosphere in a community college organized around the concept of student success was dependent upon how you defined success, and having the freedom to define that success in pluralistic ways.

**Thomas, part-time degree student,**

“I had my career before I came here. I’m from New York and I tried to go to college when I graduated high school… it wasn’t for me. My folks were pretty disappointed. I worked as a mechanic, and then I kept adding things. Eventually, I owned my own trucking business. I was making a good salary, better than most of my friends who had gone to college! So here I am. I sold my trucking business, I live here now, and I just felt I needed a new challenge. I don’t need money. I wanted to grow as a person. I am taking part-time classes for a two-year degree and doing what my folks always wanted. I had some trouble here and there, but overall, I am getting As and Bs. I looked into several universities and they were not right for me. I wanted to be able to explore, and learn about what interests me at my pace. I wanted to be able to show up like this (gestures towards old jeans and t-shirt and long grey hair) and be accepted and fit in. One of the things I love about the community college is that everyone has their own story and they get to live it. I learn as much from the younger students who always knew they would go to college as I do from older students like me. I hope that the new goals of completion and student success don’t mean that “you just be you” gets lost. That is what I am the most proud of is being a student on my own terms.”

**Community College Mission, Success, and Equity Goals are Intertwined**

Early in the interviews, participants discussed community colleges aligned with a classic open access vision.

**Brian, a part-time 2 year degree student said,**

“I grew up here. I always knew that one of the things in [our county] is that we have the community college. Anyone can go to college. Imagine that? …..you might fail, but if you want to go to school and make something better of yourself, you can give it a go. You might have to make up for lost time and work a little harder, but it will be there for you.”
When the interviews turned to discussing how community colleges are focusing intensely on student success and completion, participants grew serious, expressing views that community colleges were under pressure to become ‘just like everyone else’ and they feared a loss of identity. They were positive about attention on smoother transfer or labor market information, or enhanced credibility. Conversely, students wanted to avoid having their individual goals and identities subsumed to someone else’s goals. Participants intentionally chose community colleges because they felt the heart of the community college matched their needs and wants in complex ways.

Rob, full time technical certificate student,
“I have been hearing things and I don’t think it matters so much to me because I’m almost done…but a community college isn’t the same as the bigger schools. It shouldn’t be. When I first started here, I didn’t have a lot of exposure to school and I had a family. I wanted to be able to attend part-time and make sure I could handle it. I was lucky because someone here sat down and laid out the options and helped me make a plan. Now, there is a lot of pressure to go full-time or else. Why is that? Why should somebody else tell someone who is trying to better their life how to go about it? I don’t tell nobody else what to do. If someone wants to be a better person, and they can only go to school part-time or they have to re-take a course to get it right, so what? Anyone who is honest and can pay their tuition should be allowed to be here and anyone who finishes a program successfully should be able to find a decent job. In [this] county, that is what it is about.”

Malika, part-time curriculum student, on the subject of mission and equity:
“Sometimes when we are talking to our teachers, we get on the subject of the community college. I meet people who have overcome real problems in their lives. Maybe they didn’t do things the way they were supposed to. Maybe then went to jail, or had a baby too young, or maybe they had a nice life and something bad happened. Now years later here they are and truthfully, they are the ones who motivate the rest of us. When I first started here, I didn’t really get it. I grew as a person. I realized over time what open access really means and how everybody…everybody is here to get better. You have to let people be who they are and be ready to help them when they take the next step in life.”

Participants weren’t intimately familiar with the names of the student success initiatives, but they understood the reform pressures that the community college was experiencing. They saw and responded to college efforts to make their student experience more seamless. However, they felt others don’t understand just how strong and high quality a community college credential already is and how unique its values or mission are. Most participants argued very hard that the interpretation of community college missions of open access and the structural reforms supporting student success were positive changes, but needed to be in balance. They felt that rather than institutions trying to eliminate what they perceived as barriers to success – too many electives or changes of study, studying part-time versus full-time, etc. that reform was focused on the wrong barriers or solutions. The study participants were clear in saying that community colleges should build on what they do well – serving learners of every background who already have multiple life responsibilities. They wanted to see creativity rather than a shift towards a more conventional type of college. To summarize, participants suggested many thematic ideas to the student success goal of reform:
• Remember that the community college mission is what drew a lot of students to you and they don’t want it to become cookie cutter
• CC students are proud of being unique, independent, and of knowing they will be ‘accepted’
as legitimate learners
• Do not push part-time students to complete full-time because it meets an artificial college
time-line; respect part-time study as a legitimate goal because family-life and other
responsibilities are important
• There is NEVER too much information or help in matching students to potential career paths
or employers
• Design truly part-time study pathways
• Increase the number of inter-generational classrooms and learning opportunities – students of
all ages said that even if initially not sure, they learned the best when they were co-learning
within an integrated older/younger environment
• Continue strengthening institutional programs that support the families of learners, many of
whom are ‘taking turns’ in school – what would it look like to design co-learning
opportunities for a location-bound family to study and learn together? Or to train family
members to be ‘tutors’ or otherwise support to their student family member?
• Better integrate prior learning assessment and life experience as college credit or at least
translate/document/credential those experiences in ways that employers can value
• Demonstrate more loudly that community college students have unique qualities –
persistence, creativity, interest in personal growth, ability to ‘apply’ what they learned in real
life
• Beware of losing curriculum flexibility as a way to ‘push’ student completion
• Faculty are already working too hard and students need and want as much faculty interaction
as they can have; find ways to make that happen
• Continue to improve bureaucracy but don’t trade improvements for overwhelming students
with feeling over-scrutinized or by receiving intense amounts of email & texts
• Find ways to offer more practical out-of-the-classroom learning experiences
• Students gave very high marks to better understanding the ‘other’ side – technical/continuing
education and curriculum and/or transfer studies….have exchanges or expose students to
joint learning opportunities and hold mock ‘integrated’ work environments where your credit
and non-credit students solve problems together.

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