

NONTRADITIONAL STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF
STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES AT THE
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN -STOUT

by

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ABSTRACT

The old adage about college being the “best years of your life” may ring true for the majority of students; however, a careful analysis of what this statement may mean to students who enter the “hallowed halls” at various stages in their life course, is warranted.

Unprecedented numbers of adults who do not match the traditional student profile are enrolling in America’s colleges and universities. In fact, the traditional path to a college degree, broadly defined as enrolling in college immediately after high school and attending full-time until graduation, has become the exception rather than the rule (Horn & Carroll, 1996).

The purpose of this study was to determine the situational, dispositional and institutional barriers and/or supports that nontraditional students experience while pursuing their undergraduate degrees at the University of Wisconsin-Stout. A secondary purpose is to determine student perceptions of what programs, policies, and/or services might be instituted to assist them in their pursuit of an undergraduate degree.

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Acknowledgments

“It's only when we truly know and understand that we have a limited time on earth - and that we have no way of knowing when our time is up, we will then begin to live each day to the fullest, as if it was the only one we had.” Elisabeth Kubler-Ross

Quite simply put, my return to school was made possible by the love, support, encouragement, and example of five strong women in my family: Agnes Donatelle, Sharon Droege, Rebecca Donatelle, Barb Biljan, and Kim Droege. I hope that I've made each of you as proud of me as I am of all of you!

In the past year, I've had the pleasure of getting to know a sixth “strong woman,” my advisor, Dr. Kat Lui, and I would like to thank her for her support, patience, and words of encouragement through-out this process...now I know why everyone thinks so highly of her!

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Chapter I: Introduction

The old adage about college being the “best years of your life” may ring true for the majority of students; however, a careful analysis of what this statement may mean to students who enter the “hallowed halls” at various stages in their life course, is warranted. It is naïve to assume that 18 year olds and 40 year olds experience these years in the same way, given the myriad of differences in current and past life experiences that each brings to their baccalaureate years. Unique differences in academic histories and technological knowledge, responsibilities of work and family, finances, health-related and coping strategies, pressure of time, and immediacy of goals, may exist. Additionally, older students are susceptible to situational, dispositional, and institutional barriers that may be unique to their non-traditional student status (Kilgore & Rice, 2003).

Unprecedented numbers of adults who do not match the traditional student profile are enrolling in America’s colleges and universities. In fact, the traditional path to a college degree, broadly defined as enrolling in college immediately after high school and attending full-time until graduation, has become the exception rather than the rule (Horn & Carroll, 1996). Based on the U.S. Department of Education’s 2002 estimates, more than nine million adults are enrolled in some form of postsecondary education, are 25 years of age or older, and classified as “nontraditional” or “adult learners”(Kilgore & Rice, 2003).

Although age is typically the defining characteristic for this heterogeneous population of adult students, exactly what constitutes a nontraditional student has been the source of much discussion in recent research (Horn & Carroll, 1996). Rather than focusing solely on age, Horn and Carroll (1996) suggest that the following attributes

commonly associated with nontraditional students should be considered for classification purposes: delayed enrollment, part-time enrollment, financial independence, full-time employment while enrolled, dependents, single parent, and high school graduation status. The ability to more accurately categorize adult students as minimally, moderately, and highly nontraditional, based on these qualities, would arguably help institutes gauge the impact of individual nontraditional student characteristics on persistence and attainment.

According to a report published by the National Center for Education Statistics, nontraditional students are “more than twice as likely to leave school in their first year” than are their traditional counterparts (Choy, 2002). In addition to being far more likely to leave school without returning, nontraditional students are less likely to earn a degree within five years of beginning their postsecondary education (Horn & Carroll). The erratic enrollment patterns of this large population are a clear indication that institutes of higher education have not been successful at accommodating the unique needs of nontraditional students (Choy).

Statement of the Problem

Data collected from participants in a pilot-study revealed a unanimous sense of dissatisfaction among nontraditional students with support services, programs, and policies at University of Wisconsin-Stout (Droege, 2006). In an effort to provide a quality education to the majority of the students, the educational objectives of the nontraditional students have been compromised by a college that welcomes diversity but fails to acknowledge the unique needs and special talents of the older student. Over the course of the last four years, any and all support services at UW-Stout, including a full-time

nontraditional advisor, have been eliminated; consequently, older adults are left feeling as though they are not “real” students (Droege, 2006).

Purpose of the Study

Although older students are successfully being recruited by colleges and universities throughout the country, it appears that many are left to their own devices to deal with the unique challenges they encounter while trying to achieve their educational aspirations. The purpose of this study was to determine the situational, dispositional and institutional barriers and/or supports that nontraditional students experience while pursuing their undergraduate degrees at the University of Wisconsin-Stout. A secondary purpose is to determine student perceptions of what programs, policies, and/or services might be instituted to assist them in their pursuit of an undergraduate degree.

Research Objectives

The primary research objectives of the study are:

1. To examine the types of student support services currently available to nontraditional students at UW-Stout.
2. To determine which, if any, external risk factors are perceived by nontraditional students as threats to realizing their educational goals.
3. To analyze the effectiveness of student support services with regard to meeting the special needs of adult students.
4. To formulate recommendations to professional educators and administrators who should be concentrating on the nontraditional population at UW-Stout.

Assumptions of the Study

The primary assumption of this study was that the success and/or persistence of nontraditional students at University of Wisconsin-Stout are based on how effectively they can surmount situational, dispositional, and institutional barriers. Also, this study postulates that older students are not receiving the support services necessary to meet the special needs of this unique population.

Definition of Terms

For clarity of understanding, the following terms are defined:

Traditional undergraduate student – “Characterized as a student who earns a high school diploma, enrolls full-time immediately after finishing high school, depends on parents for financial support, and either does not work during the school year or works part-time” (Choy, 2002, p. 25).

Nontraditional undergraduate student/adult learner – “Students who are age 25 or older” (Kim, 2002, p.22).

Situational barriers – “Threats to success caused by, for example, family, job, and civic commitments” (Kilgore & Rice, 2003, p.12).

Dispositional barriers – “Intrapersonal threats to success, for example, role conflict, overload and contagion” (Kilgore & Rice, 2003, p. 13).

Institutional barriers – “Systemic barriers that exclude adults or make it difficult for them to successfully navigate through their higher education” (Kilgore & Rice, 2003, p. 12).

Student support services – “To increase the college retention and graduation rates of its participants and help students make the transition from one level of higher education to the next” (U.S. Department of Education).

Limitations of the Study

The information obtained from this study can only be generalized to the needs of the adult nontraditional students at the University of Wisconsin-Stout.

Methodology

The primary purpose of this quantitative study is to determine the special needs of nontraditional students, and if these needs are being met by the University of Wisconsin-Stout. The focus of the web-based survey was on the nontraditional student, 30 years of age or older, pursuing an undergraduate degree.

Chapter II: Literature Review

Introduction

Today's undergraduate population is different than it was a generation ago. The traditional path to a college degree, broadly defined as enrolling in college immediately after high school and attending full time until graduation, has become the exception rather than the rule (Horn & Carroll, 1996). Even though adult students, 25 years of age or older, are becoming increasingly more common on college and university campuses around the country, they are still commonly referred to as "nontraditional" students. Because institutes of higher education are often focused on traditional-aged students, despite growing adult enrollments, the unique needs of nontraditional students are not being adequately met (Choy, 2002). According to Hagedorn (2005), college catalogs, Web pages, admissions information, campus newspapers, and administrative office hours all remain geared toward younger, more traditional students.

Although age is the sole criteria often used to classify students as nontraditional, this designation does little more than identify a student as being older than what would generally be considered "normal." A multitude of differences exist among individuals included in this general categorization of students, however, and may increase the student's risk of attrition. Horn and Carroll (1996) suggest that the following attributes commonly associated with nontraditional students should be considered for classification purposes: delayed enrollment, part-time enrollment, financial independence, full-time employment while enrolled, dependents, single parent, and high school graduation status. Horn defined "nontraditional" on a continuum based on the number of these characteristics present. Students are considered to be "minimally nontraditional" if they

have only one nontraditional characteristic, “moderately nontraditional” if they have two or three, and “highly nontraditional” if they have four or more.

Once adults have made the decision to enter higher education, they are faced with innumerable threats to their success. While traditional undergraduates are generally able to direct most of their energy toward their studies, older students, parents (especially single parents), and students who work full time have family and work responsibilities competing with school for their time, energy, and financial resources (Choy, 2002). Unlike their more traditional counterparts, nontraditional students often encounter situational, dispositional, and institutional barriers to persistence with little or no support services available to them from their school (Kilgore & Rice, 2003).

Situational Barriers

Family, job, and finances all play a part in determining situational barriers. Household income, the number of dependents in the household, and the financial aid received by the students are all variables that determine the persistence rate of adult students (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002). Although other variables can be negotiated, income levels cannot. The basic needs of the family, like food and rent or mortgage, take a priority over educational expenditures. Time and energy spent trying to make ends meet, for example, can drain the most dedicated student.

Additionally, parents feel guilt about being unavailable when their children need them with mothers of children younger than thirteen feeling the most role conflict (Terrell, 1990). The age of the children may well determine the persistence of women; those with older children may persist to graduation, whereas women with younger child may interrupt or stop their education (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002).

Both a blessing and a curse, employment may have a positive psychological effect on adults, but at the cost of most of their spare time. In addition, nontraditional students may have to make career compromises for the sake of both their families and their academic work (Terrell, 1990), leading to health and financial consequences.

Dispositional Barriers

Dispositional barriers are intrapersonal and, consequently, much harder to define. Full-time students report role overload, and student, family, and job demands all contribute to role contagion (Home, 1998). Many full-time students are unable to fully anticipate the effects of their combined role demands. In contrast to jobs with fixed hours, student and family demands never seem to end. Increases in roles, demands, and time conflicts are associated with high stress, anxiety, and depression for adult female students (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002).

Because adult students may never find a cohort of similar students with whom they can connect socially or emotionally, support from family and friends is essential when adults are making the decision to stay in school or to drop out. Carney-Crompton and Tan (2002) report that traditional-aged students have more supportive individuals available in their lives than do adult students. Nontraditional students have little or no time to make connections on a college campus. One caring person who answers questions and offers advice may be viewed as a life preserver in a sea of stress and confusion; however, it may be difficult for older adults to find a suitable mentor.

Institutional Barriers

When asked about the lack of student support services available to nontraditional students at UW-Stout, a representative from the Admissions Office described a

fundamental institutional barrier: “Schools are not structured to accommodate adult students.” (Personal communication) Institutional barriers are systematic barriers that exclude adults or make it difficult for them to successfully navigate through their higher education (Kilgore & Rice, 2003). For example, office and class hours that do not meet the needs of students who work and/or care for family members. Adult students may show up for evening and weekend classes and find darkened building whose only lighting is the classroom for the course. The business, financial aid, academic advising, and other student support offices have been closed since five o’clock. This example illustrates a lack of not only understanding about the needs of adult learners but also awareness of the students themselves.

Even the way assignments are given in classes might be considered an institutional barrier and unusually stressful for nontraditional students; for example, group work. Using small groups in student cooperative learning enterprises has become a major trend in American higher education (Cheng & Warren, 2000). Despite this increase in frequency, a pilot-study conducted at University of Wisconsin-Stout revealed a litany of complaints by students about group projects (Droege, 2006). In fact, the term “grouphate” has been coined to indicate the negative attitude that many students have about group work (King & Behnke, 2004). This attitude stems from the feeling that group work implies a loss of individual control resulting, in part, from the need to spend time tutoring less competent group members. In most cases, the only way to combat this lack of control is to assume full responsibility for completing the assignment on your own. Ultimately, whether you choose to take control of the group or the leadership role is

thrust upon you, there is an added degree of stress that is absent from the other members of the group (Droege).

On the plus side, research also confirms a number of benefits to group work. Among others, those benefits that have been identified in the literature include the following: students learn teamwork skills, improve their critical thinking skills, gain more insight about a particular topic, and further develop their social skills. Studies show that employers want college graduates to have developed teamwork skills, and advocates of collaborative learning suggest that this educational strategy affords students a first-hand experience to gain these skills (Payne, Monk-Turner, Smith, & Sumter, 2000). Furthermore, it is believed that group projects "can effectively serve as a bridge between the academic community and the business world" (Page & Donelan, 2003). Ideally, working with their peers as part of a group, students will learn decision making skills and how to communicate more effectively with one another.

Despite the potential situational, dispositional, and institutional barriers to success that nontraditional students may encounter, unprecedented numbers of adults are making the decision to enter higher education. Adult students present both challenges and opportunities to colleges and universities. To better serve this large population, educators and administrators must recognize that nontraditional students exist and that they are different from their conceptions of traditional-aged students (Kilgore & Rice, 2003).

Chapter III: Methodology

Adult students present challenges and opportunities to colleges and universities. To serve this increasingly large population of nontraditional students, educators and administrators must first recognize that they are different from our conceptions of traditional-aged students. Although older students are successfully being recruited by colleges and universities throughout the country, it appears that many are left to their own devices to deal with the unique challenges they encounter while trying to achieve their educational aspirations. The purpose of this quantitative study was to determine the situational, dispositional and institutional barriers and/or supports that nontraditional students experience while pursuing their undergraduate degrees at the University of Wisconsin-Stout. A secondary purpose was to determine student perceptions of what programs, policies, and/or services might be instituted to assist them in their pursuit of an undergraduate degree.

Subject Selection and Description

According to information obtained from the University of Wisconsin-Stout's website, there were 8,257 students enrolled during the Fall semester of 2005. Because nontraditional statistics were not included in the break-down of the total enrollment, the researcher submitted a query requested to the Registration and Records Department at UW-Stout with the following criteria: undergraduates, enrolled part or full-time, 30 years of age or older at UW-Stout.

Instrumentation

A survey was created and administered to the target population of nontraditional students; a copy is included in Appendix A. Demographic information collected from

participants included: gender, age, marital status, whether or not the participant has children, how many credits they were currently taking, whether or not the participant is a transfer student, class standing, employment status, how the participant is financing their education, and the primary reason for their return to school.

In order to determine nontraditional students' perceptions of student support services at UW-Stout, participants were asked to rate their satisfaction on a five-point scale: strongly agree (5), agree (4), neutral (3), disagree (2), and strongly disagree (1). Using the same five-point scale, participants were asked to respond to statements regarding possible factors that increase the risk of attrition among nontraditional students: lack of social support, full-time employment, dependents, multiple role demands, and financial constraints.

Data Collection Procedures

A link to an 18-statement, and one question, web-based survey was sent via email to 407 students that were identified by the Registration and Records Department as having the necessary characteristics to be included in the targeted population of nontraditional students at UW-Stout.

Data Analysis

A number of summarizing statistics were used to reduce the data collected in this quantitative study to: means, medians, correlations, and standard deviations. The Statistical Program for Social Sciences, version 10.0, (SPSS, 2002) was used to analyze the data. Additionally, a thematic analysis of the responses to the sole open-ended question was conducted.

Limitations

Because there really is no such thing as “spare time” in a student’s life, time constraints were the primary limitation of this study. A secondary and far greater restraint was the unavailability of current literature on the adult student population.

Chapter IV: Results

The purpose of this study was to determine the situational, dispositional and institutional barriers and/or supports that nontraditional students experience while pursuing their undergraduate degrees at the University of Wisconsin-Stout. A secondary purpose was to determine students' perceptions of what programs, policies, and/or services might be instituted to assist them in their pursuit of an undergraduate degree.

The primary research objectives of the study were to:

1. To examine the types of student support services currently available to nontraditional students at UW-Stout.
2. To determine which, if any, external risk factors are perceived by nontraditional students as threats to realizing their educational goals.
3. To analyze the effectiveness of student support services with regard to meeting the special needs of adult students.
4. To formulate recommendations to professional educators and administrators who should be concentrating on the nontraditional population at UW-Stout.

The data collection instrument, an 18-statement and one question web-based survey, was deployed via a hyperlink included in an email message to 407 students identified by the Registration and Records Department as having the necessary characteristics to be included in the targeted population of nontraditional students at UW-Stout: undergraduates, enrolled part or full-time, 30 years of age or older.

Reported statement by statement, and using a thematic approach to summarize the responses received to the sole open-ended question, this chapter presents the results of the

web-based survey instrument. Unexpectedly, 107 students participated in this survey for a better-than-average response rate of 26%.

Demographic information collected from participants included: gender, age, marital status, class standing, and employment status. Besides the more standard demographic information collected in surveys, participants were also asked if they have children, the number of credit hours they are currently enrolled in at UW-Stout, whether or not they are a transfer student, how they are financing their education, and the primary reason for their return to school. Additionally, participants were asked to respond to statements regarding possible factors that increase the risk of attrition among nontraditional students: lack of social support, full-time employment, dependents, multiple role demands, and financial constraints.

Based on the highest percentages of demographic data collected per characteristic, the majority of the 107 participants were female (62%), married (54%), between the ages of 40 to 49 (42%), have children (74%), are enrolled full-time (61%), are transfer students (79%), in their senior year (52%), employed full-time (38%), financing their education via loans (63%), and are returning to school due to a personal life transition (49%).

The remainder of this chapter explains the results of the web-based survey on a statement by statement basis. With the exception of one open-ended question, participants were instructed to indicate their degree of agreement with the survey statements using the following range of responses: strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, and strongly agree. Additionally, participants were given the option to add any additional comments that they may have had on the subject.

Statement 1: While pursuing my undergraduate degree at UW-Stout, my family has been a valuable source of support.

In agreement with much of the literature on nontraditional students, 64% of the participants (n = 68) strongly agree that their family has been a valuable source of support while pursuing their undergraduate degree. Because adult students may never find a cohort of similar students with whom they connect socially or emotionally, a dispositional barrier, this statement was designed to determine the participant's perception of how important the support a student receives from their family can be to their success. One of the remarks found in the "Additional Comments" section of the responses indicated that the participant's parents have been "an incredible source of support," however, their children view the experience "as very taxing on their lives."

Statement 2: While pursuing my undergraduate degree at UW-Stout, my friends have been valuable sources of support.

Confirming the assertions found in the literature reviewed for this research project, 39% (n = 42) of the participants strongly agree that their friends have been a valuable source of support while pursuing their undergraduate degree. Also a dispositional barrier, this statement was designed to determine the participant's perception of how important the support a student receives from their friends can be to their success.

Statement 3: Employment demands sometimes interfere with my educational objectives.

The majority of participants were equally divided at 29% apiece between strongly agree (n = 31) and agree (n = 31) that employment demands sometimes interfere with

their educational objectives. Considered a dispositional barrier, employment demands contribute to an adult student's role contagion; for example, employee, student, and parent.

Statement 4: Parental obligations sometimes interfere with my educational objectives.

Almost half of the participants (49%) with children were in agreement (n = 53) that parental obligations sometimes interfere with their educational objectives. Many of the additional comments reinforced the notion that situational barriers, for example being both a parent and a student, may create role conflict for the adult learner. Although one participant did agree that parental obligations made her educational experience more stressful, she added that her son was a source of motivation and "also why I started college."

Statement 5: As a nontraditional student, I sometimes feel overwhelmed by multiple role demands (i.e. spouse, parent, employee, etc.).

An astonishing 89% (n = 95) of the participants surveyed agreed that they felt overwhelmed by multiple role demands, a dispositional barrier. Increases in roles, demands, and time conflicts are associated with high stress, anxiety, and were apparent in one participant's comments: "There are many days that I think I have done the wrong thing, not knowing which way to turn."

Statement 6: I feel guilty about expending resources (i.e. time, money, etc.) to achieve my educational aspirations.

Slightly over half (53%) of the participants (n = 57) agreed that they felt guilty, a dispositional barrier, about expending resources to achieve their educational aspirations. Perhaps the comments of one participant best exemplify the remarks received for this

statement: "I don't feel as bad about the money, I will make it back, but time with my kids I can't get back. I hate missing their events."

Statement 7: An important consideration for an adult learner is how to pay for higher education.

As expected, the overwhelming majority (92%) of participants (n = 99) agreed that an important consideration for an adult learner is how to pay for higher education. Because time and energy spent trying to make ends meet can drain the most dedicated students, a situational barrier, household income is a variable that determines the persistence rate of adult students (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002).

Statement 8: I am aware of the support services available to students enrolled at UW-Stout.

Although 42% of the participants (n = 44) agreed that they are aware of the support services available to students enrolled at UW-Stout, perhaps more revealing was the 24% (n = 26) of the responses that were neutral. Additionally, there were a number of remarks in the "Additional Comments" section of the responses that indicated participants are "not fully aware" of all of the support services available; an institutional barrier.

Statement 9: I am satisfied with the types of support services available at UW-Stout.

A surprising 38%, (n = 41) of the participants surveyed had a neutral response to whether or not they were satisfied with the types of support services available at UW-Stout. Overall, 36% of the participants (n = 39) tended to agree slightly more than the rest that they were satisfied with the types of support services available at UW-Stout; therefore, they are not considered institutional barriers.

Statement 10: Student support services are readily accessible to me.

The highest percentage (36%) of participants' (n = 39) responses to the statement of student support services accessibility was neutral. Because 39% of the participants (n = 42) agreed slightly that student support services are readily accessible, their perception of this availability does not make this an institutional barrier to their success.

Statement 11: Student Services at UW-Stout offers a valuable source of support and information in pursuit of my undergraduate degree.

Again, the highest percentage (41%) of participants' (n = 44) responses to the statement about student support services offering a valuable source of support and information in pursuit of their undergraduate degree was neutral. The fact that 37% of the participants (n = 40) agreed slightly that student support services are a valuable source of support and information, their perception of this service does not make this an institutional barrier to their success. Additionally, one participant commented that they have "obtained answers to all the questions I have asked from the UW-Stout staff."

Statement 12: I frequently utilize one or more of the student support services available at UW-Stout.

Although 27% of the participants (n = 29) had a neutral response to the frequency with which they utilize one or more of the student support services available at UW-Stout, slightly over half (52%) of the participants (n = 56) disagreed with this statement. The fact that participants are not utilizing student support services alone does not constitute an institutional barrier but, perhaps with further investigation, the reasons why they are not taking advantage of these services may uncover an obstacle.

Statement 13: After being accepted into my program, I participated in a UW-Stout student orientation program.

Considered an institutional barrier to attrition, 51% of the participants (n = 55) disagreed with the statement that they had been invited to attend a student orientation program at UW-Stout.

Statement 14: Classes are scheduled on days and times that accommodate my life circumstances (i.e. work, family, commute, etc.).

Participants (n = 58) agreed (54%) with the statement that classes are scheduled on days and times that accommodate their life circumstances; therefore, the availability of classes is not an institutional barrier to meeting their educational objectives.

Statement 15: When required for a class, participation in group projects are a worthwhile experience.

Overall, participants (n = 55) agreed (51%) that when required for a class, participation in group projects are a worthwhile experience; however, the “Additional Comments” section of the responses did not clearly discount this as an institutional barrier. The remarks of one participant exemplify the mixed emotions this statement elicited from participants: “Had both good and bad experiences with group projects. Overall I believe they are worthwhile experiences for younger students.”

Statement 16: The programs, policies, and services at UW-Stout recognize the special needs of adult students.

Although the majority (39%) of the participants (n = 42) were in agreement that the programs, polices, and services at UW-Stout recognize the special needs of adult students, 29% (n = 32) of the responses were neutral. Because participants’ perceptions

of UW-Stout's programs, policies, and services seem to recognize the special needs of adult students, they can not be considered institutional barriers to attrition.

Statement 17: I have a social support network at UW-Stout.

Exactly half (50%) of the participants (n = 53) disagree with the statement that they have a social support network at UW-Stout, and 22% of the participants (n = 24) had a neutral response; thus, this lack of social support may be deemed a dispositional barrier to achieving their educational objectives. Even though one of the participants acknowledges having a social support network, they added that it took "two years to acquire it."

What programs, policies, and/or services might be instituted at UW-Stout to assist nontraditional students pursuing their undergraduate degree?

Most of the 72 responses to this open-ended question were centered primarily on four themes: a tutor center devoted solely to nontraditional students, a student orientation exclusively for nontraditional students, more online and weekend classes, and additional funding for adult learners. Surprisingly, almost all of the comments (97%) were regarding a lack of support services, as well as a lack of awareness of support services, at UW-Stout.

In summary, participants agreed that multiple role demands (i.e. spouse, parent, and employee), the lack of a social support network at school, and financial concerns are dispositional barriers to achieving their educational objectives. Additionally, participants identified paying for higher education as a situational barrier to attrition. Lastly, the only institutional barrier recognized by participants was the lack of a student orientation program for nontraditional students at UW-Stout.

Chapter V: Discussion

Although older students are successfully being recruited by colleges and universities throughout the country, it appears that many are left to their own devices to deal with the unique challenges they encounter while trying to achieve their educational aspirations. The purpose of this quantitative study was to determine the situational, dispositional and institutional barriers and/or supports that nontraditional students experience while pursuing their undergraduate degrees at the University of Wisconsin-Stout. A secondary purpose is to determine student perceptions of what programs, policies, and/or services might be instituted to assist them in their pursuit of an undergraduate degree.

A link to an 18-statement, and one question, web-based survey was sent via email to 407 students that were identified by the Registration and Records Department as having the necessary characteristics to be included in the targeted population of nontraditional students at UW-Stout: undergraduates, enrolled part or full-time, 30 years of age or older. Demographic information collected from participants included: gender, age, marital status, whether or not the participant has children, how many credits they were currently taking, whether or not the participant is a transfer student, class standing, employment status, how the participant is financing their education, and the primary reason for their return to school.

To determine nontraditional students' perceptions of student support services at UW-Stout, participants were asked to rate their satisfaction on a five-point scale: strongly agree (5), agree (4), neutral (3), disagree (2), and strongly disagree (1). Using the same five-point scale, participants were asked to respond to statements regarding possible

factors that increase the risk of attrition among nontraditional students: lack of social support, full-time employment, dependents, multiple role demands, and financial constraints.

The results of the summary indicated that participants agreed that multiple role demands (i.e. spouse, parent, and employee), the lack of a social support network at school, and financial concerns are dispositional barriers to achieving their educational objectives. Additionally, participants identified paying for higher education as a situational barrier to attrition. Surprisingly, the only institutional barrier recognized by participants was the lack of a student orientation program for nontraditional students at UW-Stout.

Limitations

Because there really is no such thing as “spare time” in a student’s life, time constraints were the primary limitation of this study. A secondary, and far greater restraint, was the unavailability of current literature on the adult student population.

Conclusions

Using the literature reviewed for this research to create the web-based survey, participants’ confirmed the existence of situational, dispositional, and institutional barriers to attrition in seven out of the 17 statements (41%). A thematic analysis of the responses to the sole open-ended question, however, revealed that participants’ comments (97%) were regarding a lack of support services, as well as a lack of awareness of support services, at UW-Stout. Because the majority of participants agreed with the survey statements that they were aware of student support services, and that they were accessible

and a valuable source of support, the researcher was surprised to discover that the responses to the open-ended question contradicted these findings.

Participants were instructed in the cover-letter sent with the email to respond to the web-based survey statements and the open-ended question based on two definitions of student support services: one from the Department of Education, and the other from Student Services at UW-Stout. After reading the participants' comments about the lack of student support services at UW-Stout, it became apparent that there seemed to some confusion about the definitions that were used in the cover-letter. For example, one participant strongly agreed that they were satisfied with the type of support services available at UW-Stout, and responded to the question of which programs, policies, and/or services might be instituted to assist nontraditional students as follows: "Take your pick. There is nothing in place right now! I would like an advisor that works closely with me. During my 2 years at Stout, I don't feel like I have gotten the proper guidance."

Recommendations

Future research on student support services available to nontraditional students at UW-Stout should list the specific student support services that are currently available, instead of using either of the definitions that were used in this research.

Also, this researcher believes that something as simple as conducting a nontraditional student focused orientation would, in addition to providing students with some basic academic direction, leave adult learners with a positive perception of student support services at UW-Stout.

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Appendix A

Support Services for Nontraditional Students

The goal of student support services is to increase the college retention and graduation rates of its participants, and help students make the transition from one level of higher education to the next. The mission of Student Services at University of Wisconsin-Stout is "Educating students in skills essential to full participation in a diverse society and academic success."

Directions: Use your educational experience at UW-Stout, and the mission of Student Services, as the basis for answering the following questions.

Demographic Information

Gender*

Male

Female

Age*

30-39

40-49

50-59

60-65

65>

Marital Status *

Single

Married

Divorced

Widow(er)

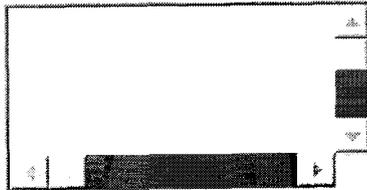
Children*

Yes

No

If yes, age(s) of child(ren)

Enrollment Status*

 Full-time Part-time Number of credits enrolled in this semester

Transfer Student*

 Yes No

Class Standing*

 Freshman Sophomore Junior Senior

Employment Status*

 Employed full-time Employed part-time Unemployed

Reason for return to school (Check primary reason only)

 Personal life transition Proactive life planning Job-skill requirement Other, please specify

1. While pursuing my undergraduate degree at UW-Stout, my family has been a valuable source of support.*

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

Additional Comments

2. While pursuing my undergraduate degree at UW-Stout, my friends have been valuable sources of support.*

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

Additional Comments

3. Employment demands sometimes interfere with my educational objectives.*

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

Additional Comments

4. Parental obligations sometimes interfere with my educational objectives.*

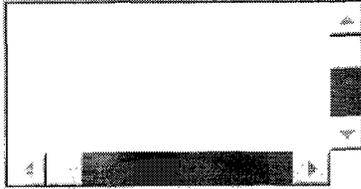
Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

Additional Comments

5. As a nontraditional student, I sometimes feel overwhelmed by multiple role demands (i.e. spouse, parent, employee, etc.)*

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

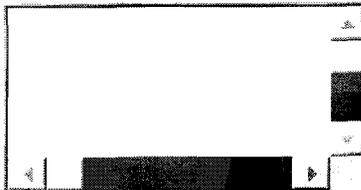
Additional Comments



6. I feel guilty about expending resources (i.e. time, money, etc.) to achieve my educational aspirations.*

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

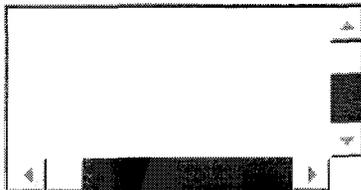
Additional Comments



7. An important consideration for an adult learner is how to pay for higher education.*

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

Additional Comments



8. I am aware of the support services available to students enrolled at UW-Stout.*

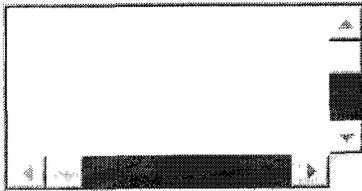
Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

Additional Comments

9. I am satisfied with the types of support services available at UW-Stout.*

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

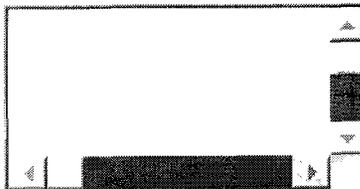
Additional Comments



10. Student support services are readily accessible to me.*

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

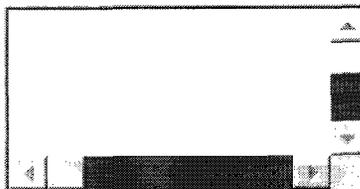
Additional Comments



11. Student Services at UW-Stout offers a valuable source of support and information in pursuit of my undergraduate degree.*

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

Additional Comments



12. I frequently utilize one or more of the student support services available at UW-Stout.*

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

Additional Comments



13. After being accepted into my program, I participated in a UW-Stout student orientation

program.*

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

Additional Comments

14. Classes are scheduled on days and times that accommodate my life circumstances (i.e. work, family, commute, etc.).*

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

Additional Comments

15. When required for a class, participation in group projects are a worthwhile experience.*

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

Additional Comments

16. The programs, policies, and services at UW-Stout recognize the special needs of adult students.*

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

Additional Comments

17. I have a social support network at UW-Stout.*

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

Additional Comments



18. What programs, policies, and/or services might be instituted at UW-Stout to assist nontraditional students pursuing their undergraduate degree?