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# **Navigating the Margins: The Journey of a Cohort of Non-traditional Students on the Path to College**

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## **Introduction**

With the severe economic downturn and other social ills that beset adult students, who are charged to pursue an education, it is no wonder why dropout and stop-out rates are so high. This is particularly significant as it pertains to non-traditional and adult students. Non-traditional students are particularly burdened as their life processes and activities are dependent on their own decisions and economic wellbeing. To ensure students' success, facilitators, program coordinators, and all stakeholders are continuously faced with the challenges to design strategies to help students overcome all the obstacles they face. Therefore, coordinated efforts must be taken to explore and assess a student's motivation as it relates to the impediments that hinder his/her path or taper his/her margins in order to be successful in higher education.

Hardin (2008) discussed some of the challenges faced by these adult students, or non-traditional students. According to Hardin (2008), these students exhibit characteristics such as delaying enrollment into higher education until adulthood, enrolling part time, working full time, being financially independent, having family responsibilities, and academic deficiencies. Such characteristics can form barriers that decrease the chances of students' success in their quest to pursue higher education. This is especially relevant in a tempestuous economic frontier.

In addition to Hardin's perspective, Home and Hinds (2000) claimed that women with family responsibilities have distinctly different needs from the traditional student population who fits perfectly into the design and structure of most educational institutions. Therefore, strategies must be implemented to meet their needs and help them navigate the path on their educational journey.

To navigate the barriers (loads) on such a journey, one must be adequately motivated (powered) by external and internal factors. These factors provide the driving force or extra margin needed to traverse and overcome struggles. In this study, we explore the challenges faced by a cohort of students enrolled in a GED<sup>®</sup> to college transitions program. By understanding how these students navigate their paths through the program, we hope to reveal some strategies that can be employed in order to help other students' transition from General Education Diploma (GED) and other basic adult education programs to college.

In this study, the researchers explore the experiences of 14 GED students enrolled in a GED to College Transitions course at a southern community college in the U.S. during the spring 2011 semester. Additionally, the researchers make meaning of the participants' experiences and reveal how they develop skills to navigate the margins and become successful. The study was guided by the following research question: What strategies are students using to navigate and overcome barriers thus setting the stage for academic success?

## **Theoretical Framework**

This paper is situated within McClusky's (1963) theory of margin. McClusky's theory is rooted in the biological, psychological, and sociological reactions of the individual (Weiman, 1984). According to Buhler (1935) the biological events, life experiences and other achievements reflects expanded events

and eventual stabilization of the individual in relation to their biological stage. Therefore, the biological stage an adult is at will guide their response to social issues and may be a deterrence for ones quest for education. Hence, since the theory of margin has a major focus on the demands and stressors of adult life processes, it forms the foundation on which one can investigate the challenges students face to complete their studies. In addition, when combined with positive elements, McClusky's (1963) theory adds value and scope in extrapolating life experiences, especially as it relates to adult's journey towards lifelong education.

McClusky's theory takes in consideration the unique features, complications and possibilities within the adult's life experience (Main, 1979). These include all the experiences that encourage or discourage the individual to pursue a particular goal. Therefore, the theory of margin is a practicable means of providing guidance and direction to students who want to be successful on their voyage towards lifelong learning.

In order for students to engage in learning, they must have a support system (margin of power) available. This system will help them fight the odds or face the challenges (loads); thus creating greater chances (margin) for them to be successful. It is this support system that McClusky refers to as the power structure in the theory of margin.

#### **Power**

Power is a crucial element of McClusky's theory of margin and is described as the energy, vitality, the inner will, abilities, positions, allies, network and other materialistic resources that are available to balance the negative elements (loads) that may hinder one's success (Hiemstra, 1993; Main, 1979; McClusky, 1963). Therefore, power consists of both external resources such as family support, social capacity and economic capabilities (Hiemstra, 1993). It also uses internal motivation or acquires tools, which sanction effective navigation of life's challenges. Some of these internally motivated power structures are coping skills, self-drive, nature or self-assurance and autonomy (Main, 1979). Power structures are what allow the students to endure and complete their course successfully. These structures help to effectively navigate the loads and widen the margins. This study is interested in power structures as our objective is to reveal a path through which non-traditional students can navigate their success.

#### **Load**

According to Stevenson (1982), load is any tangible or intangible object, thoughts, emotions, biological discrepancy or any task, which devours energy when it is mentally entertained or physically put in place by the individual. However, when combined with positive elements (power), it has value and scope in extrapolating life experiences, especially as it relates to adult's journey towards lifelong education. Load is typically considered the task associated with normal life requirements (Hiemstra, 1993). Main (1979) made a clarification between internal and external loads. According to Main (1979) external loads are those, like Hiemstra (1993) discussed are associated with everyday functions. For example, the activities associated with taking care of self and family, economics and task with the career are all classified as external loads. On the other hand, internal loads refer to those associated with self-concept, goals, and personal expectations (Main, 1979) that forms barriers towards achieving ones goal. While there is an interacting interface between the two loads, they are different. The interaction can or may make the severity of the other much worse. For example, the individuals' self-concept or esteem can make it harder for them to attain their desired career. On the contrast, doing a menial job can negatively affect the individuals' self-concept. Therefore, non-traditional students must be skilled at juggling multiple task and hassles on their time (Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner, 2007). It is this demand and responsibility that McClusky refers to as the load in life. As such, the researchers believe this

theoretical framework is relevant in understanding how the participants in this study overcome the loads while on the path through their educational journey.

### **Margin**

In order for students to engage in learning, they must have a margin of power available. Lagana (2007) stated, “margin” refers to the excess of power that people possess and Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner (2007) reiterate McClusky’s view that margin is the ratio of load to power in one’s life. Load and power combine to increase or decrease the area of margin. McClusky (1963) argued the quantity or degree of margin that exist in people’s lives is crucial to health and continued holistic development of the adult. As such, the researchers believe this theoretical framework is relevant in understanding how the participants in this study navigate the margins while on the path to college.

### **Data Collection Method and Study Participants**

We used a qualitative research design (Creswell, 2007) to explore our participants’ experiences in the GED to College Transition program. The data were collected through classroom observations, field notes, and interviews with the student participants and the instructor. Student participants were interviewed twice, once in the beginning and then again in the final weeks of the course. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed by the researchers.

This study focused on 14 students enrolled in an intensive GED to college transition program at a southern community college of the USA. The study began January 2011 and continued to May 2011. Twelve participants were female two participants were male. One participant was Caucasian, one participant was African American, and twelve participants were Latino/a. Thirteen of the participants have children; one was the care taker of a disabled sibling. All participants had been out of school between 5 and 25 years.

### **Findings**

By examining the data through the lens of power and load, our data provides insight into how these adult learners are navigating the bumpy road to return to school and eventually attend college. The data analysis revealed several themes pertaining to the students’ challenges and support on the journey to complete their studies. The themes identified are discussed within the context of McClusky’s load and power theory. In the discussion we deliberate on how each theme classified as a power structure or load may increase or decrease the degree of margin. We observed that some themes may be both power and load depending on the context in which they are viewed. For example, family may be a motivating factor (power) or it can hinder (load) a learner from completing his/her study. Additionally, because all the participants completed their studies, the margin of power seemed to surpass the margin of load.

### **External Load**

These are observable barriers and everyday functions that tend to obstruct the individual in acquiring their desired goals. Hiemstra (1993) stated everyday functions are associated with activities such as taking care of self and family, economics and task with the career. Our findings revealed family/children and financial issues as being the most common themes as everyday functions.

#### **Family/Children**

Participants recognized that taking care of their families was an important and normal life requirement for them. Although this may be a normal life requirement, having more than one child increases this requirement and thus makes the load larger. For example, Joe, a participant in the study, observed his family as a load. He stated “...I got four kids now so it kinda took away from me going, to school when I tried several times...” Joe recognizes that caring for his children is a normal life requirement; however, having “four kids” also increased his load while reducing his power and leaving a

little or no margin to return to school. Jessica, another study participant, also made mention of her four kids as a large load impeding her ability to fulfill her requirements in to complete her studies. She commented "...like I'm a single parent. Technically I got four kids. I adopted one through CPS which is 5." Having such a large load requirement can potentially reduce the margin adult students needed to complete their educational journey.

### **Financial issues**

Some participants attributed some of their external load to financial issues. One of the major factors associated with dropout is low income level. Participants, who lack access to money to finance their personal needs and that of their family, view financial issues as an important load that must be overcome in order to be successful. For example, Marie, one of the participants, spoke about the burden of buying school supplies. Marie stated "I don't have that much money to be buying supplies; I barely don't have even money to be buying for my kids right now". The burden of buying for her children and having to buy for herself is a demonstration of how two external factors combines to reduce her margin of power; meaning Marie's margin is reduced by the increased financial burden and could limit her ability to engage in learning activities.

### **Internal Load**

The analysis revealed that many of the barriers the participants encountered were unseen. These barriers are classified as internal load. An internal load is a more complex and perplexing event which occurs internally rather than externally. For example, numerous participants had fears which prevented them from having confidence in themselves and their abilities. Fear can diminish an adult learner's self-esteem and confidence leaving them unable to develop the autonomy needed to learn and be successful. For example, Jeff stated "just the fear of not knowing it I guess when it comes time to do the test. That's a big thing." Another participant, Lisa stated "yeah, well because I was nervous to begin with so you don't really know what you're going, you know, what you're going to get into especially if you've been out of school for such long periods of time. And I don't know. I guess I was scared." This type of internal load creates pressure that forms barriers in the path of the adult learners' journey towards their GED.

### **Internal Power**

According to the theory of margin, power is those structures that form the foundation on which support is built on to enable the students to complete their studies. Analyses of the data identified the participants' personal goals and drive to complete their studies as internal power. Main (1979) described internally motivated power structures as coping skills, self-drive, nature or self-assurance and autonomy (Main, 1979). In this study, personal goals and life experience were identified as the most common themes within the context of power.

### **Personal Goals**

For most of our participants, their personal goals were simply to earn their GED and go on to college. For example, Rachel stated "I want to graduate college, actually just to graduate. Have the paper. you know graduate. That I did it so. From there if it goes further that's fine, you know, I'll go with it. but to be here and graduate. I, that's something for me, you know? That's a goal for me." The goal of graduating and earning "the paper" is her motivation and gives her the self-drive to continue.

### **Life experience**

By using life experience, participants were able to make adjustments in power and load allowing them to continue on the path to college (Merriam et al, 2007). Lisa explained, "like, I was working in the mornings also, and I gave up a day at work, so, cause, I said school is more important". Lisa understands how adjusting her load at work gives her more power to attend school. While Carol explained,

“...there’s a lot of thing[s] I wouldn’t have learned in school that I learned [by] working and doing things, cause I dropped out and went straight to work at fifteen years old...” Life experience helped participants understand the importance of school and also provided them with valued lessons in life.

### **External Power**

According to Hiemstra, (1993) external power comes from positive external resources that support the individuals’ ability to complete a task. These external resources include family support, social capacity and economic capabilities (Hiemstra, 1993). Mary, one of the participants, stated “... You know we also have children who, who want to be role models for them. Um, we want to show them that, you know, giving up is not, is not an option, you know. Keep striving for what you want and that’s what I want to show my kids.” Mary identified her kids as the motivational force that supports her and keeps her working toward the completion of her GED. In addition, Griselda stated, “yeah. There’s just, there’s no way you’re going to be able to get by with just minimum wage.” Griselda uses the hope of getting a better job as her motivation.

### **Discussion and Implication**

In order to navigate the path successfully, Main (1979) suggested that “a margin allows a person to invest in life expansion projects and experiences including learning experiences” (p. 23). In this study, the participants made great investments and sacrifices to complete their high school equivalency. During the interviews, numerous loads created by everyday functions were revealed. However, all the participants were able to create a wide enough margin which gave them the ability to offset the load. This was done by taking advantage of the available power structures and at times creating new power. The ability to use the limited power structures to navigate large loads gives the adult learner multiple options to navigate the barriers during the learning process (Main, 1979).

Adult learners frequently navigate the margins of education by continually trying to find a balance between family, work and college. The analysis of the data in this study revealed many themes related to both load and power; more importantly it provides insight into how the participants managed load thus creating a margin that provides mobility in learning. The particular themes such as family, financial issues, life experience, staff and peer support, and self-drive all impact the learners’ capability to complete their study by a decrease or increase in both power and load which created the right balance of margin needed.

Therefore, understanding how adult learners navigate the margins of life on the pathway to college is necessary to help these learners to overcome barriers and achieve academic success. As adult educators, it is our intention to help students to unload themselves, increase their power and widen their margins in order to be successful in their educational quest. To do so, scholars and practitioners must engage in extended studies to identify workable strategies students use to provide enough power to overcome the loads. This study represents a great start as all the participants were able to complete their studies. It is hoped that we will follow these participants to engage in their experiences of navigating the journey through college. This will provide needed insights on how adult students transition from a GED program to college. It will provide a template for educators to assist other students to make the necessary transitional steps to be successful in college.

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