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What I Do Matters, Too: Transformation and Success of First-Generation Adult Women in Undergraduate Education

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Abstract: Researchers qualitatively examined the experiences of first-generation adult women in a 4-year university, and found that participants (a) experienced enhanced academic self-efficacy through positive instructor feedback, (b) resolved the “dilemma of choice” regarding role expectations, and (c) developed a sense of responsibility for the academic status of the next generation.

Background

In 2005, 14.9 million students were enrolled in postsecondary education, and 31% were adult learners (NCES, 2007-182). The U.S Census Bureau (2005) reported that in 2003, 63% of all college students aged 35 and older were female. The NCES (2005) also found that while 68% of continuing generation students will complete a 4-year degree, only 28% of first-generation students will be successful. Adult, female, first-generation students run an especially high risk of attrition due to less participation (Donaldson & Graham, 1999), conflict with cultural peers (Luttrell, 1989, p. 39), or feelings of guilt about neglecting her family (Terrell, 1990). Although researchers have studied first-generation or female adult learners in vocational or community college settings, little is known about how this population succeeds at 4-year research universities.

Theoretical Framework

To guide this study on successful, female, first-generation adult learners in an 4-year university, the researchers utilized a conceptual framework synthesized from Tinto’s (1975) theory of undergraduate student dropout behavior and Gilligan’s (1982) model of women’s moral development. While Tinto theorized that college students must disassociate from prior communities to successfully integrate into an academic institution, Gilligan proposed that women grow developmentally by maintaining connection with others. Therefore, the need exists to determine how female, first-generation adult women succeed in an academic environment.

Methodology

Participants were eight first-generation adult women (ages 26-50) who had been successful in their undergraduate studies at a large, public research university. The authors used a basic (generic) qualitative methodology (Merriam, 1998) to identify themes. The sample was purposefully selected from female volunteers who had at least a Junior standing, were over the age of 25, and were first-generation students. Data was collected via semi-structured interviews, a brief demographic questionnaire, and participant reflective writings. Data was analyzed using open and axial coding, and constant comparative methods.

Results

Three themes were found in the data regarding the experiences of first-generation adult women who were successful undergraduates at a 4-year institution: 1) They retain pre-college relationships. Having experienced and overcome personal hardships as children or young adults, the first-generation women in this study developed a profound sense of responsibility for the next generation. Each spoke directly about their desire to become a role model for academic persistence and personal success. 2) A shift in perceived academic self-efficacy (from low to high) was a direct outcome of positive feedback from instructors. Receiving high grades contributed to the women's rise in academic self-efficacy, and subsequent academic persistence. 3) Participants in this study moved through a developmental process that resolved Gilligan's "dilemma of choice." Rather than perceiving time to one's self as "selfish and wrong," time spent on education was perceived as "selfish and right," and then, simply as "right."

Discussion

The findings of this study are only generalizable to the sample and setting in which the research occurred. The sample is not representative of the entire population of female, first-generation, adult learners at the university where data was collected, or in any other university. None the less, further research is needed to determine how engagement in higher education alters first-generation adult women's perspectives. In this study, the women experienced change in how they view their world; specifically, their place in it, and their responsibility to it. Enhanced self-efficacy also seemed to enhance confidence, self-esteem, and self-respect. As more and more adult learners seek out a 4-year degree, it is critical that professionals in higher education (both academic affairs and student services) continue to develop research agendas that inform the educational practice and policy of four-year undergraduate institutions.

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