The Vermont Connection

Volume 34 *There is Hope: Breaking Cycles to Transform Higher Education*

Article 9

January 2013

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Recommended Citation

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This article reviews current literature on the topic of nontraditional students. Additional materials related to social capital in the forms of family involvement and parental support are also reviewed to illustrate their relation to the present understanding of the experiences of nontraditional students in higher education. The current definition of what it means to be nontraditional is not sufficient, and an argument for the inclusion of considerations of family privilege is presented.

For years, student affairs practitioners have been developing categories and classifications to better understand students – as female or male; as African American, Latin@, or White; as over or under 24. Although these categories can be useful to advance research, their rigid limitations fail to capture the complexities of student identities and most often limit our understanding of the experience of traditional students. Following this realization, I set forth to review current literature on the topic of nontraditional students and consider the effect that family privilege has on the experiences of these students. In this article, I present a thorough review of the concept of family privilege within the framework of the following categories: adoption and foster care, long-distance and international support, abusive and dysfunctional families, and students with elderly or deceased parents. Finally, I further develop this concept of family privilege and strive to expand the understanding of nontraditional students in order to include these additional traits. The intent is to closely examine this population through the lens of family privilege to better understand the differences that these students may experience in higher education.

Nontraditional Students

Traditional students, those who range in age from 17 to 19 upon entry to col-

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lege, are most often viewed as those continuing from high school to college and are considered students first (Levin, 2007). Nontraditional students are typically viewed as the antithesis of the traditional. In general, nontraditional refers to students who do not fit the typical profile of the 18-22 year old full-time under-graduate (Giancola, J., Munz, D., & Trares, S., 2008). The literature has defined nontraditional students with age ranges such as 22 and older (Giancola at al.), 24 and older (Horn 1997), and 25 and older (Kasworm, 2008). At the University of Vermont, a nontraditional student is defined as someone who is 23 or older, and for the purposes of housing, includes students with families, single parents (50% custody), and transfer students 21 years and older.

Although much of the literature about nontraditional students centers on age, contemporary research, like that of Susan Choy (2002), defines nontraditional students with additional characteristics such as:

- Delay in enrollment (does not enter post-secondary education in the same calendar year that the student finishes high school);
- Part time attendance for at least part of the academic year;
- Working full time (35 hours or more per week) while enrolled;
- Financial independence as it pertains to determining eligibility for financial aid;
- Having dependents other than a spouse (usually children, but sometimes others);
- Being a single parent (either not married or married but separated and has dependents); or
- Not having a high school diploma (completed high school with a GED or other high school completion certificate or did not finish high school).

The definition of what it means to be a nontraditional student is expanding with an increase in student populations and inclusion of a more contextual under-standing of various educational institutions. However, a more useful way to view nontraditional students is not as a population characterized by such specific and quantifiable traits, such as age and marital status. Rather, nontraditional students, or what Levin (2007) refers to as "new" nontraditional students, might be better understood as a disadvantaged population (p. 10). This disadvantage can be associated with a number of conditions such as economic status, cultural background, ability, social or human capital, or family privilege as a type of social capital. The concept of social capital was first introduced by Bourdieu (1980), and explained by Seita (2001) as "the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition" (p. 10).

Family privilege, then, is a form of social capital. Seita (2001) defines family privilege as the benefits, mostly invisible, that come from membership in a stable family. It is a set of advantages such as a sense of belonging, feeling of safety and unconditional love, and introduction to spiritual values. Dissimilar to other types of privilege, benefits of family privilege can appear at birth, conditionally change, or dissolve over time. In most instances of family privilege, children observe parents or older siblings as a model for how to be successful in life (Seita, 2001). Schultz (1961) first used the words "human capital" as a term to further describe social capital (p.5). He was the first scholar to make a direct connection of social capital to family. He proposed that time spent with members of one's family creates positive connections and, similar to other types of social gain, the benefits of sharing time and cultivating a positive relationship with family accrues over time (Setia, 2001). Passed from parents to children, human capital "includes the social and educational skills that allow young people to follow rules, solve problems, and communicate at a high level" (Seita, 2001, p. 130). However, there are many students in higher education who do not have the consistent support of a traditional family, the resources provided by an extended family, or other forms of family privilege. Even in what could be considered a traditional family, the existence of family privilege is not certain. The creation and development of social capital must be intentional and can often be taken for granted. Seita (2001) likens family privilege to oxygen: "we would never notice its absence unless we were suffocating" (p. 3).

Adoption

Adoption is among the number of ways that students are impacted by family privilege. According to The Adoption Institute Organization (2012), there are over 1.5 million adopted children in the United States. This is more than 2% of children in the United States. The United States Department of Health and Human Services and Child Welfare Information Gateway authored some important considerations regarding the impact of adoption on adopted persons and the resulting impact on their higher education experience (2012). It was noted that many questions about identity begin during adolescence, and that adopted adolescents' identity development typically includes several factors. For one, there may be unresolved questions about where they *belong* socially, educationally, and culturally that could impact their readiness to participate in college.

Adoptive identity is difficult to understand without considering the societal attitudes towards kinship and bloodlines (Wegar, 2000). It has been argued that Western society bases family ties primarily on blood relations. This puts adopted children in a difficult position as they consider their own identity within familial relations. Since their family experience has been rooted in "nurture" rather than "nature," adoptees can feel marginalized within the dominant culture (Wegar, 2000, p. 364).

Grotevant, Dunbar, Kohler, and Lash Esau (2000) identify three aspects of identity development specific to adoptees that student affairs practitioners should consider when trying to understand this population. They give context to the experience by addressing the following: the student's self-definition of identity, the coherence of how they understand their personality and relation to their identity, and a formation of how they link their past, present, and future (Grotevant et al., 2000). Although it has been surmised that adoption can present additional challenges for the adoptee's development of a sense of self, the intersection between the student's sense of self and the social interactions with family can further explore and challenge the context of these understandings (Grotevant et al., 2000). Student affairs professionals working with adopted students should take into account the student's sense of self and personal identity development to avoid the "one size fits all" approach. For some, a connection to cultural or ethnic support services may be useful, but for others, may be ineffective. Similarly, searching to reconnect or learning more about their biological family may be important to many, but not all.

Much like concepts of inclusive language, it is important for student affairs practitioners to follow some general guidelines when working with adopted students and their families. The use of positive adoption language helps to illustrate that adoption is one way to build a family, but not the only way to do so (Adoptive Families - Positive Adoption Language, 1992). One is not more important than the other. For example, it is best to say, *"birth-parent"* rather than *"natural parent,"* otherwise suggesting that there is something "unnatural" about adoptive parenting. Other examples of positive adoption language include: birth child, parent, and they were adopted as opposed to their negative alternatives: own child, adoptive parent, and they are adopted. It is important to approach each student independently and to allow the self-perceptions surrounding whichever part of that student's identity is most salient to inform how we offer support.

Long Distance and International Family Support

Without question, the percentage of international students on United States' college campuses has been increasing steadily for the last several years (Lee & Rice, 2007). For many schools, the enrollment increase is a result of some intentional admissions efforts. Among several motivations, a shift toward viewing students as "customers" has contributed to the increase in pursuing international students for additional revenue and other benefits (Lee & Rice, 2007, p. 383). According to Lee and Rice (2007), increased enrollment of international students in American institutions not only provides additional revenue, but also increases the diversity of the student body and contributes a new perspective to classroom discussions, thereby increasing awareness of other cultures. Unfortunately, enrollment increases have not been matched with an equal amount of support or consideration of their experiences, and may be contributing to some of the dissatisfaction of

international students (Lee & Rice, 2007).

For a traditional-aged international student, the initial decision to approach their family to ask permission to pursue education is often the first of many difficulties faced when coming to the United States. Beyond that, the processes required for immigration are full of specific protocols with regulations and interviews that are often so burdensome that students become discouraged from completing the process (Altbach, 2004). The students who make it through these initial difficulties find themselves far from home without the accessible support of their family as they transition to life as a college student in the United States.

Parental support and involvement in the initial stages of the college process often helps shape the path of opportunity and continued success in college (Rowan-Kenyon, 2008). For international families, the unfamiliarity with the United States' education system can make it difficult to for them navigate, further challenging their ability to support their students from a distance. College visits, conversations about college expectations, and descriptions of college-related activities can have a profound impact on a student's readiness to encounter such activities (Rowan-Kenyon, 2008). Assumptions about a student's familiarity and experience with these understandings can have implications for student affairs professionals' encounters with these students.

Other research has indicated that families unfamiliar with the United States' education system lacked the confidence to communicate directly with school administration, further supporting the importance of specific resources for international students' families. Some researchers found that low-income international families did not believe they had the skills to help their students navigate the educational system and often relied on the school's staffs to both initiate and assist with the process (Horvat, Weininger, & Lareau, 2003).

For some adult international students, the need to take care of their parents from afar can present additional challenges. Relocation and the decision to move abroad for many young adults can be attributed to several factors, such as change in employment, decision to raise a family, pursuit of higher education, or all three (Smith, 1998). The decision to move abroad for nontraditionally aged international students can be complicated for those who serve as caregivers or providers of support for their parents.

Additional concerns can be created by the challenge to regularly communicate with parents and family members who may have previously relied on their children for support. According to Parreñas (2005), some families report a varied amount of access to resources (e.g., internet connections, reliable telephones) that would aid in maintaining familial connection abroad. For many working-class families, the

means to keep up transnational communication is difficult at best, thus increasing the potential for feelings of abandonment and disconnection between members of a family.

Although current advancements in technology allow many families to maintain and sustain transnational communication, it does not, and cannot, act as a substitute for full family intimacy. "The joys of physical contact, the emotional security of physical presence, and the familiarity allowed by physical proximity are still denied to transnational family members" (Parreñas, 2005, p. 333). Long distance families and social inequalities experienced by international students shape the quality of their experience in higher education as well as impact their experienced intimacy of family life.

<center>Abusive and Dysfunctional Families</center>

The need to expand the definition of a nontraditional student in today's colleges and universities through the lens of family privilege requires a deeper look into the experiences of children from abusive and dysfunctional families as well as those who consider themselves to be independent. In spite of the fact that research centered on the educational experiences of children from abusive families is limited, some outline important findings related to the potential impact of early emotional bonds with primary caregivers.

Lopez, Melendez, and Rice (2000) described how the quality of one's relationship and emotional bond with their parent or guardian impacts future adult relationships. Lopez et al.'s (2000) interpretation of adult attachment theory supports the idea that students' histories, interactions, and dependence on consistent parental support not only impacts their ability to connect and trust adults in their lives, but also their introduction to higher education.

Another article gathers data that show some of the risks of growing up as adult children of alcoholics (ACOA) and adult children from dysfunctional families (ACDF) (Fischer, 2000). Aside from the research illuminating the fact that ACOAs in college showed signs of poor physical and mental health, they also demonstrated significantly fewer coping strategies than non-ACOAs (Fischer, 2000). Researchers report that a greater correlation exists in the manifestation of psychological distress in ACOAs as compared to non-ACOAs (Fischer, 2000). The main predictor of these outcomes seems to be the experience of growing up in a family that is dysfunctional, not merely the existence of alcoholic parents. It should be no surprise that in instances where parental alcoholism is present, college students experience greater levels of stress and anxiety when faced with cultivating positive adult relationships. However, ACDFs experience a greater amount of self-reported stress than ACOAs, therefore the presence of dysfunc-

tion in the family seems to be a more accurate predictor of stress than alcoholic parents (Fischer, 2000). For students who come from family environments such as these, their lack of family support while on campus may be met with additional unseen stresses when school is not in session.

<center>Elderly and Deceased Parents</center>

When considering the impact of parental or family involvement on the college experience of nontraditional students, it is important to consider students who have choosen to leave behind an elderly parent, or those who experienced the loss of one or more of their primary guardians. These students may encounter the college experience in a very different way than their peers and have additional challenges. An older student who moves away to pursue higher education may experience feelings of guilt about their ability to contribute to the care of their elderly or aging parents. This decision may impact the ease with which students are able to relocate for school.

Smith (1998) uses the changing family constraints model to examine how difficult it may be for an adult student to decide whether or not to relocate for an educational opportunity when considering the need to take care of their aging parent. The ability of a student to access financial resources can also affect locations of potential higher education institutions, thus impacting future contact with their aging parents. Middle-class young adults may decide to relocate for a number of significant life-changing events in addition to the pursuit of a higher education degree such as marriage, childbearing, or a career change (Smith, 1998).

Among the list of potentially major life-changing events, the loss of a loved one is often regarded as the most significant. Data show that "approximately 25% to 30% of college students are in the 1st year of bereavement and that between 40% and 50% are within the first 2 years of experiencing the death of a family member or friend" (Servaty-Seib, & Taub, 2010, p. 947). For students who have been touched by the death of a loved one, they "often regard the story of their lives as being demarcated by their death loss experience" (Neimeyer, Laurie, Mehta, Hardison, & Currier, 2008, p. 30).

The loss of a parent for traditionally aged students can lead to identity development disruptions, especially if they had depended on their parents for regular assistance and emotional support. Nontraditionally aged students who have experienced the loss of a parent might also feel an additional level of isolation from their millenial peers. While millenials are often characterized as "being sheltered, feeling special, being close with parents, and being team oriented" (Servaty-Seib, & Taub, 2010, p. 954), nontraditional students tend to hold dissimilar characteristics such as a "higher degree of cynicism, [and] orientation toward individualism

and independence" (p. 955), further inhibiting their ability to identify with their younger peers. The tendency for nontraditional students to keep personal issues to themselves further adds to the feeling of isolation and lack of support for bereaved nontraditional students.

Feelings of sadness while experiencing grief are often coupled with additional stressors such as a decreased ability to concentrate on schoolwork, or insomnia that often worsens over time following the loss. Many nontraditional students report experiencing a "changing of the guard" as they begin to take on responsibilities of the deceased parent such as the mortgage, family finances, care of a surviving parent or siblings, or arrangements for the "reorganization of life without the loved one" (Stroebe & Schut, 1999, p. 214).

For student affairs practitioners, a lesson from counseling psychology literature may prove helpful. Servaty-Seib and Taub (2010) described how "there is a societal pull to inhibit grief, [therefore we have] an opportunity to provide acknowledgement and recognition that others, particularly on a college campus, may not be offering" (p. 965). Although many students find ways to deal with loss while enrolled in higher education, many students may not find the support they need to grieve. Further research on the experiences of these students may provide higher education professionals with ideas that could inform their interactions with students, development of programs, and improvement of policy.

Conclusion

Research in the field of student affairs has contributed to a greater understanding of the students with whom we work and broadened our awareness of students who have unique needs. However, perpetual use of the term nontraditional will distract from our understanding of the needs of this population. We need to expand the definition to include students' perceptions and understandings of their identity. Taking into account additional factors such as those mentioned by Choy (2002) full/part time enrollment, employment, financial independence, care of dependent[s], high school diploma, etc., increases our understanding of this population and improves upon the definition. Recognizing the differences between nontraditional students is a start.

Nontraditional students are a significant percentage of the college population, and are in need of more updated research in the field of higher education. The concept of family privilege may provide an additional framework that administrators can use to better understand these students. Various levels of family privilege can be found among adopted students, in long distance and international students, students from abusive and dysfunctional families, and students with aging or deceased parents. It is important to note that this is not a comprehensive list, but rather a place to

begin as we consider additional characteristics to expand our understanding of nontraditional students. Updating our definition and increasing our awareness of family privilege are important ways in which student affairs educators can create more meaningful experiences for these students.

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