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Students as Parents

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STUDENTS AS PARENTS

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Abstract

The effects extra responsibilities have on academic performance, attendance, and future career goals were investigated. These variables were especially of interest as they relate to the non-traditional student. College students (N=75) were asked to complete a questionnaire. All students were informed that factors concerning college attendance were being looked at and that all information would be confidential. There was a statistically significant difference between the overall GPAs of non-traditional students and traditional students. Despite the fact that non-traditional students have work more hours, they miss less classes per week than traditional students. Finally non-traditional student's primary reason for attending college was for self-improvement when compared to traditional students. This suggests that more difficult task make for a more highly motivated individual.

Each year, more and more parents enter the work force. In Keith Melville's book, "Marriage and Family", he acknowledges the difficulties of juggling work and parenting. In one recent study, cited in Melville's book, researchers interviewed 600 employees of a large corporation in Boston. They were seeking a better understanding of how family arrangements affected their work performance and vise versa. They found that one-third of the subjects both male and female felt guilty about leaving their children during the day. More than two in five said the strain for managing their family responsibilities was the main reason for their depression. Significantly, many of the participants felt frustrated about not having the time for household chores or events involving their children, or having time for themselves or their mates.

With these strains in mind, working parents are also entering undergraduate and graduate programs. In fact, the fastest growing segment of new entrants in colleges and univerisities are a group of individuals called non-traditional students. These students are older, and often have conflicting responsibilities as those described above. Currently, little is known about the effects additional responsibilities have on academic performance, attendance, or the career plans of non-traditional students. For the purpose of this research, non-traditional students are those individuals above the age of twenty-six. These students may be married or single, with or without children. Many studies have been done regarding the effects of task difficulty and effort on motivation. Rand (1967) treats task difficulty as interchangeable with goal difficulty. He describes a difficult task as hard to do, either because it is complex, that is it requires a high level of skill and knowledge, or because it requires a great deal of effort. Rand defines a goal as the object or aim of an action. An undergraduate program requires all of the above. For non-traditional college students, the extra responsibilities of economic support and family demands make their goal of receiving a degree become even more difficult. From these motivational studies of effort and task difficulty, there is evidence that more difficult challenges, as those facing the non-traditional student, can lead to enhanced performance.

Kaheneman (1973) argued that more effort is expended on hard tasks than on easy ones. Sales (1970) investigated and found that higher work loads produce higher levels of effort or drive. Higher goals produce higher performance than lower goals or no goals becuase individuals tend to work harder for the former. In research from a different perspective, that of cognitive expectency theory, LaPorte and Nath (1976) allowed some subjects unlimited time to read a prose passage. Those asked to read the passage were also asked to get 90% of 20 post-reading questions correct. They spent more time on the passage than those subjects asked to

get 25% of the post-reading questions correct. Another study conducted by Rothkopf and Billington (1979) found that more time was spent on goal relevant than on incidental passages.

In totality, these studies suggest that non-traditional students may be more highly motivated due to all of their responsibilities than the more traditional students. Based on this information, it is hypothesized that regardless of all their other work and obligations, non-traditional students have better academic performance, and better attendance when compared to the more traditional students. Moreover, is predicted that older students attend college more for self improvement than to fulfill future career goals.

Method

Materials

The self-report method was employed using a one-shot, questionnaire form. The form was prepared to evaluate six areas of a student's life. Of the thirty-six questions presented, thirty-three of them were fixed-response. These questions could be answered more easily and quickly with fewer scoring problems. In order to provide subjects with some flexibility, several questions required a one word response, and of the multiple choice responses, many included an other, please specify response. The remaining three questions were those of free-response. The goal of this survey was to ask a selected sample of traditional and non-traditional college students the same set of questions, so that their answers could be used as a basis for describing the characteristics of the population from which the sample was drawn.

A set of instructions summarized the purpose of the survey, explained the basis on which the subjects were selected, gave general directions on the method of response to the questions, and assured students that all information was confidential. The questions in this survey were developed to evaluate the subject's personal background, educational background, class attendance, their family situation, and their future career plans. As a precautionary measure, subjects were asked if they held any concerns that may be helpful in further evaluation of the questionnaire.

Procedure

Most students were obtained from the psychology pool at the University of Missouri--Rolla. There were specific times set for these subjects, and the survey was administered in a classroom setting. The accidental sample technique was employed to acquire the population of interest. This allowed every element to have an equal chance of being included in this sample. Each student was asked to read the directions and skim through the questionnaire form to see if there were any further questions. They were informed that the questionnaire took 5-10 minutes to complete, reconfirmed that their replies would be completely confidential and that they should answer each question as openly and honestly as possible.

Subjects

Seventy-five students from the University participated in the survey. These students were comprised of an accidental sample in nature. In order that non-traditional students were included, additional students were found on campus, and asked would they participate in the survey.

Results

The first hypothesis had to do with whether non-traditional students perform better in their coursework than did traditional students. To test this, the self-reported overall GPA and the GPA expected for the current semester were compared for the two groups. There was a statistically significant difference between the overall GPA, $F(1,57)=5.6$, $p<.02$, and the semester GPA, $F(1,65)=4.32$, $p<.04$. In line with predictions, non-traditional students reported higher overall GPAs (M=3.19) and GPAs for the current semester (M=3.36) than did traditional students (Ms=2.75 and 3.36 respectively).

The second hypothesis stated that, desspite the likelihood of many conflicting demands, non-traditional students attend more classes. This hypothesis was confirmed, $F(1.65)=5.94$, $p<.02$. Non-traditional students reported having missed an average of 2.4 classes since the beginning of the fall semester whereas traditional students reported having missed an average of 3.4. This occurred despite the fact that non-traditional students were more likely to work, and to work slightly more hours (M=20.18) per week, than did traditional students (M=13.00, $F(1,32)=3.17$, $p<.08$).

The final hypothesis was that non-traditional students are more likely to be attending college for personal fulfillment than for specific career objectives. Table 1 summarizes the most important reason for why respondents were attending college. As predicted, more nontradition-al students (43%) said the primary reason they were attending college was for self-improve-ment when compared to traditional students (7%). For traditional students, fulfilling career goals (54%) was more likely to be the primary reason for going to college than it was for non-traditional students (35%).

Discussion

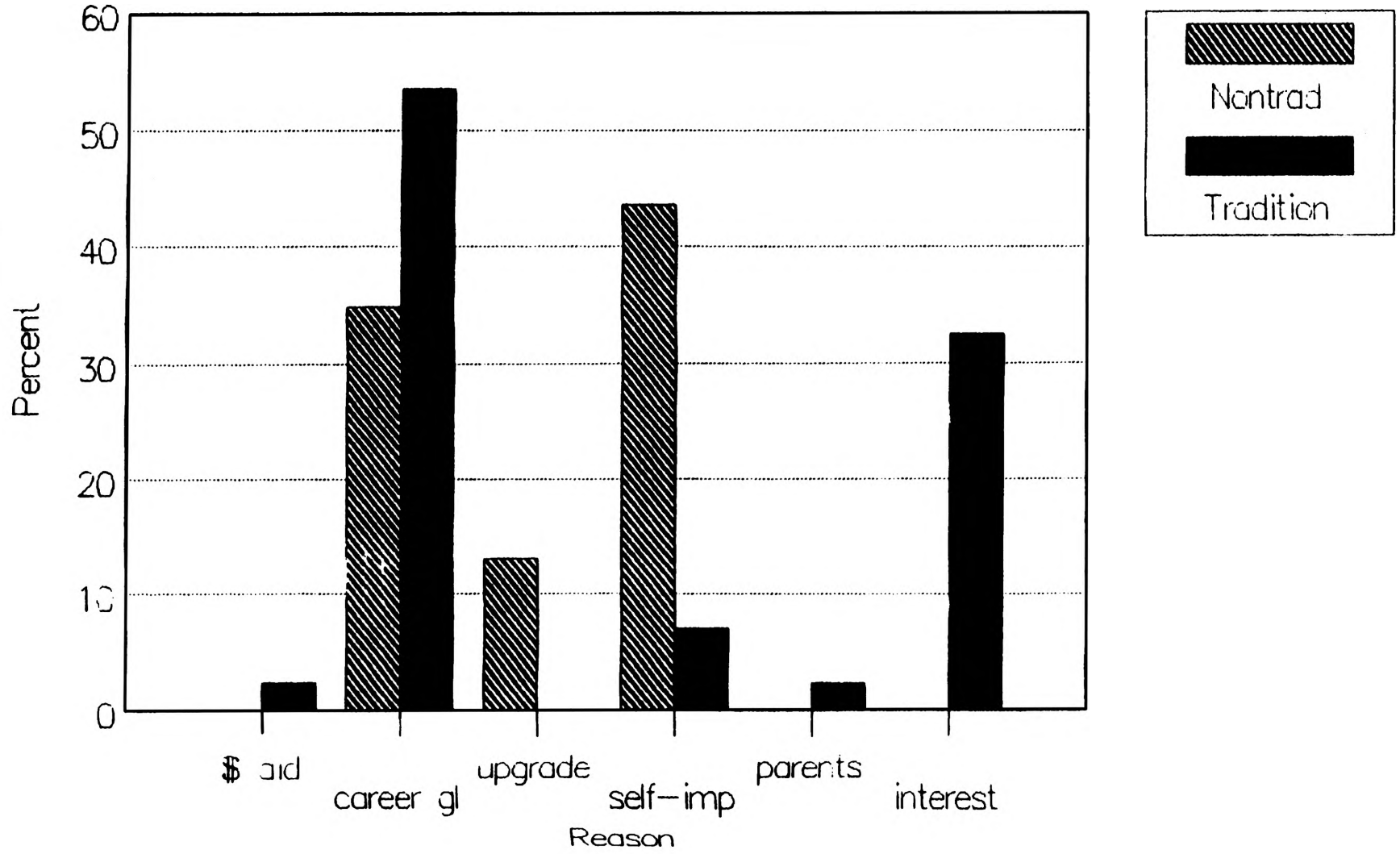
The present experiment investigated the effects that working, and family demands have on non-traditional students' academic performance, attendance, and future career goals. Despite what commonsense would seem to indicate-that the extra responsibilities of the non-traditional student would impair their performance in college-it was found that their performance is higher when compared to traditional students. Motivational studies such as that investigated by Sales (1970) allows us to understand this phenomenon. Higher work loads produce higher levels of effort or drive. Higher goals produce higher performance than lower goals. Rand (1967) describes a difficult task as hard to do, either because it is complex, that is, it requires a high level of skill and knowledge, or because it requires a great deal of effort. For non-traditional college students, the extra responsibilities of economic support and family demands make their goal of receiving a degree become even more difficult. From these motivational studies of effort and task difficulty, there is evidence that more difficult challenges, as those facing the non-traditional student, can lead to enhanced performance.

Task performance, attendance and future career plans were used in this study to test motivation. Though all necessary precautions were taken, the self-report method is not always valid. Assuming that the survey responses validly reflected students' true behaviors and feelings, the rate of attendance could account for the average difference in grade point averages. Non-traditional students reported missing 2.4 classes since the beginning of the fall semester; whereas, traditional students reported having missed an average of 3.4. Attendance is a very important factor in determining students' grades. This is especially true over time. In the case of this experiment, it would be necessary to look deeper into each individuals case to further analyze this possibility.

Intuitively, one might think that there is less time for a student to study if he or she works and tends to family demands. This brings up the issue of the way students study.

Figure #1

Decision to Attend School



Non-traditional students may study differently than traditional students. They may dedicate more of their time studying more general information, or they may study only to prepare for test and exams. In Melville's book, "Marriage and Family", he spoke of the guilt, despair and frustrations working parents felt about not having the time to spend with their families, nor having much time for themselves. Instead of attending many of the campus functions, or off campus parties, non-traditional students may use that time to study. The depression caused by all work and no play, may be rampant among these non-traditional students. Future research could address these concerns. Problem solving techniques would be valuable with regard to how working parents could effectively deal with the extra stress of attending college.

Non-traditional students chose self-fulfullment over and above other reasons for attending college. A student of this nature may take his/her education more seriously than other students. Age may also be a factor. Non-traditional students may have a much better idea of what they want, and therefore, choose fields of study that reflect the knowledge needed to participate in those specific career choices. This may also be relative to their age.

In summary, there are several questions left unanswered, and many avenues left untraveled. However, the present results confirm that non-traditional students do better academically, and they miss less classes when compared to traditional college students. They have chosen to attend college as a need to be self-improved. We are also more able to understand the effects extra responsibilities have on non-traditioanl students academic performance, class attendance and future career goals. The possibility of more research in this area is endless. As a future project, I would like to look at their schedules to analyze similarities that could be used in preventative measures and problem solving techniques for those seeking that extra challenge of a college education in their lives.

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