Nontraditional and First-Generation College Graduates: Help Seeking and College Adjustment

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“I didn’t know where I fit in the academic community. I didn’t know where [my college] fit in the academic community. And by the academic community, I mean the academic community in culture at large.”

- Patrick, pseudonym (age 55, nontraditional, first-generation college graduate)
First-Generation and Nontraditional College Students

- First-generation college students (FGCS)
  - Parents have not obtained a 4-year college degree (Davis, 2010)
- Nontraditional students (adult learners)
  - 25 years or older (Bean & Metzner, 1985)
- Significant part of undergraduate population (NCES, 2017; CLASP, 2015)
  - Lower rates of academic retention (Markle, 2015; Soria & Stebleton, 2012)
- Limited research in some respects (Chang et al., 2020)
Challenges in College

- Social isolation or exclusion (Chen, 2017; Taylor & House, 2010)
- Major stressors: Financial and work conflicts (nontraditional) (Gigliotti & Huff, 1995)
- Academic preparation (FGCS) (Choy, 2001; Purswell et al., 2008)
- Weaker support systems (FGCS) (Jenkins, 2013; Orbe, 2004)
- Cultural mismatch (Stephens et al., 2012)
Present Research

- Family case study
  - 2 nontraditional, first-gen. college graduates
  - 1 first-generation college graduate
- Explored
  - Adjustment and transition to college
  - Help-seeking behaviors
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Began College</th>
<th>Type of Learner</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sarah (pseudonym)</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>Adult learner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patrick (pseudonym)</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Adult learner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mike (pseudonym)</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Half sibling (maternal)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Qualitative Method & Analysis

• Analyze rich data and contextualize findings in ways that quantitative methods cannot (Clarke & Braun, 2006)

• Key themes
  o Importance of social reputation
  o Age influencing college experience
  o Importance of relational universality
**THEME 1: Social Reputation & Impression Management**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>“I was… a football player… status was hugely important.”</th>
<th>“I hated the idea that I would... have somebody thinking boy what a jerk, you know?”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Patrick, 55-year-old man</em></td>
<td><em>Mike, 49-year-old man</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>“So, I’m constantly keeping myself in check… always being mindful of doing the right thing.”</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Sarah, 56-year-old woman</em></td>
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<td>THEME 2: Age &amp; College Experience</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Sarah, 56-year-old woman</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>“The most challenging thing was just being a non-traditional student... finding where you fit in the classroom.”</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Patrick, 55-year-old man</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Hardest... oh probably just being 25. I thought at that time that was kind of old... a lot of kids who do come out directly from high school.”</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Mike, 49-year-old man</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>“I didn’t need a lot of guidance... I joined a fraternity. I had a social circle. I navigated college just fine.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**THEME 3: Social Support & Relational Universality**

“It was more like I’m having this issue in this class and let’s work on this together.”

*Patrick, 55-year-old man*

“They who could relate to me... Other older students. Professors always prefer the... non-traditional students. So, I just had them in my corner.”

*Sarah, 56-year-old woman*

“Yeah definitely some of my older fraternity brothers... were mentors to me sure.”

*Mike, 49-year-old man*
Discussion & Conclusions

- Age-related differences in college adjustment
- Underutilization of social support from other siblings
- Self-reliance tied to hard independence (Chang et al., 2020)
- Relational universality → campus-based supports for academic problems
- Making the college environment inclusive and comfortable → improve social connections and potentially college adjustment (Goncalves & Trunk, 2014; Schwartz et al. 2018)
THANK YOU!

Questions?

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