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Title: Non-Traditional Minority Students at the University of Illinois and Parkland Community College

About the Author: I am a student returning to school after two years being gone. Being forced to withdraw from classes due to financial instabilities, I returned with a different mind set than when I first started. I work full time while attending college full time and I am 26 years old. I became interested in the struggles of other non-traditional students, especially those in ethnic minority groups, when our RHET 105 class worked on topics in diversity at the university. Next year, I will finally graduate with a bachelor's degree in Media Studies, 10 years after graduating high school.

Keywords: non-traditional student, non traditional student, minority student, adult learner, returning student, higher education

Abstract: As a non-traditional student myself, I wanted to explore the struggles of other non-traditional students, especially those also falling into minority groups. This paper intends to explore the programs in place at the University of Illinois and Parkland Community College to help non-traditional minority students succeed not only financially, but academically and socially. There are many roadblocks in place for non-traditional minority students in terms of scheduling, child care and a dual feeling of trying to assimilate due to ethnic differences and age differences with peers who may follow a more traditional student status. Also being discussed are some things being done at a political level to increase funding and encourage attendance of non-traditional minority students.

Initial Exercises:

Question:

Plan:

Data: Non-Traditional Minority Students at the University of Illinois

When looking around yourself in a classroom, it is often easy to point out what one would consider to be a student of ethnic minority. That student appears to be Asian, that one African American, and so on. It is much more difficult to know if a student falls into the category of non-traditional without actually knowing the person or knowing about their situation.

Has this person had to take time off school because of raising a family? Did this person join the military and is now able to attend school for their career? Unless a student is much older than the typical 18-24 age range, it is difficult to tell if they are a non-traditional student, which according to the National Center for Educational Statistics is defined as follows: over the age of 25, returning to school after a period of time off, having children or other dependents, working full or part time due to financial independence, retired or a veteran of the military. People falling into these categories sometimes feel set apart from other students, especially the older they get. When that is coupled with being an ethnic minority, the feeling can be intensified.

The goal of this research is to highlight what kinds of programs are in place to help non-traditional minority students not only financially, but socially and academically. I would like to explore what is being done at a political level to increase funding to programs that help non-traditional minority students succeed in obtaining their education. By interviewing representatives from the admissions department at the University of Illinois and Parkland Community College, I intend to find out what is being done to remove the roadblocks that prevent some people from attempting to obtain a higher education degree. I hope to see if current programs are proving successful, and what plans in the future are being put in place to increase success of non-traditional minority students.

Also, by interviewing students that fall into these categories themselves, I plan to gain insight into what makes these students feel set apart and what they think would help them overcome the barriers to their education.

So what are some of these things that pose difficulties for non-traditional minority students? There is quite a bit of academic research and study available on issues surrounding minority enrollment at universities and colleges, however not much surrounding the traditional vs. non-traditional status or statistics involving both race and age. Since the 1990's, non-traditional student representation has increased dramatically, making this an extremely salient issue. The number of students 25 or older has increased 60 percent since the 1970's, the largest portion of them being women. Currently at the University of Illinois, this number is only 2.5 percent with minority student attendance totaling at 34 percent. (UIUC Student Enrollment, 2008) At Parkland Community College it is 38.2 percent with 29 percent total minority student attendance. (Environmental Scanning Data, 2008) Both of these amounts are expected to rise. Among both graduate student and undergraduate students, African American women make up the largest part of students of color falling into this group. The added difficulties of a non-traditional student are those very things that define one as non-traditional: having children or dependents, working full or part time,

being financially independent, and the age difference.

The issue of having children or dependents while trying to reenter into the educational system is a predominant stressor for non-traditional students. Many students with children struggle to find assistance with childcare, especially because most universities do not have a program for childcare assistance implemented into their system. This not only adds to scheduling difficulties for the non-traditional student, but also finding time to do work outside of the classroom. Some parents will have to wait until their children go to bed to find time to do homework or type papers for classes. Statistically, minorities suffer from the roadblocks of “(a) disproportionately lower socioeconomic status, (b) high rates of poverty (e.g., 42 percent for Blacks and 39 percent for Hispanics), (c) unfavorable and disorderly school climate and urban demographic realities, and (d) lack of resource equity for educational costs and supplies” (Ntiri 137). If the student cannot afford a personal computer, the stress of finding time to type papers at the school or find a way to afford a computer become another difficulty to overcome. Depending on how experienced the student is with computers, which can also be adversely connected with older age being the fact that “only one in three older adults in the US has access to the internet” (qtd in Fast Facts from Senior Net, 2006), figuring out computer usage and online activities connected with today’s college classroom environment can become another obstacle for the non-

traditional minority student. This digital divide affects many minorities in lower class conditions, which often deters some from even attempting to return to an educational environment. According to Ntiri, who published a study in Urban Education concerning access to higher education for minorities and non-traditional students in a technology-based society, those who do not make the effort to keep up with the new technology run the risk of being “among the two-thirds of the American labor force that works outside the new economy and is relegated to areas of work in which wages in real dollars have not risen or have, in fact, declined” (140). This can leave them stuck at a poverty level, continuing a vicious circle.

Ntiri mentions that another common problem non-traditional students deal with is the “lack of institutional support to address the multiple and often conflicting demands of work, family and school” (136). Not offering a wide array of time slots for classes can make it very difficult for the non-traditional students to put together a schedule that works around their busy life. Finding childcare for a working parent can be challenging enough, but when a school schedule is also implemented, it is a daunting task at the least. More so than scheduling classes, there arises a problem in paying for those classes. Funding for school is one of the leading causes of people not returning. When issues such as children and dependents and barely making ends meet with bills arise, paying for

college becomes an insurmountable possibility. Some would argue that financial assistance is available if one searches hard enough, but lack of technological facilities and knowledge of where to look leave some feeling hopeless in the pursuit of affording college. Searching for adequate funding for school also takes time, between typing essays and submitting applications after finally finding any sources, and many who would be considered non-traditional minorities upon returning to school simply don't have the time to put into the task. There is a prime example of this struggle in Marion Bowl's ethnographic study of returning minority students in the United Kingdom. One of the participants, Salma struggled to understand what kind of financial aid she was entitled to while still getting assistance for living as a single parent of two children. The confusion almost led to her being removed from the university due to non-payment of tuition. She didn't have the time, resources or guidance to help her understand what she needed to be focusing on. The staff seemed ill-equipped to lead her in the right direction for her specific circumstances, leaving her lost on her own to figure things out.

This feeling of alienation and isolation stems from multiple factors, both external and internal. A primary feeling of isolation actually stems from the institution itself. A major claim of Marion Bowl's research is that much of research on adult education has been from an institutional perspective, trying to see what the non-traditional minority students can

improve in themselves to make their transition easier, as opposed to what the institution needs to do to make this process easier. The stress of dealing with the factors that make these students non-traditional is enough to make the process difficult, but Ntiri came upon another issue. She found that some students reported issues related to the, as she says, Black Experience. She identifies a lack of “presence and mentoring of black faculty and staff, presence of black peers and the resulting network, the positive attitude of some department faculty” (136) as a institutional barrier for some students of the black minority population. These factors need to be present to aid in the integration of non-traditional minority students who may not be used to spending a large amount of time outside their cultural safe zone. The digital divide stated earlier is another institutional barrier for the non-traditional minority student. Modern classrooms are becoming more and more technologically savvy, and these returning students may struggle with adapting to the introduction and utilization of new technologies, feeling outcast for their inability to keep up with their classroom peers.

An internal isolation also exists for the non-traditional minority student. “Entering higher education can be a shock, accompanied by a sense of personal powerlessness. Evidence from other research with non-traditional students, indicates that higher education is experienced in different ways than by standard, 18 year-old entrants” (Bowl 142). The

18 year-old student comes to college fresh from the social scene of high school, whereas the non-traditional student has been away from that for a period of time. Readjusting to the social contexts of a classroom, especially with a room full of those the student feels he or she may not be able to relate to, can be internally isolating and traumatic. This coupled with any fear of race discrimination that the student may have internalized by this point in his or her life, and the experience is worsened. Even in the context of socializing, a normally enjoyable and rewarding part of attending a university, the non-traditional minority student may feel at ends. In an observation done in the dining area of the Illini Union, it was observed that, although there was handful of what were visually identified to be non-traditional students, none were socializing. Plenty of what appeared to be standard age students were observed in groups socializing, but those who were obviously of very differing age groups were dining and studying alone. While this is not necessarily conclusive of all non-traditional minority students, it is an example of a lack of inclusion. Bowl presents an interesting point in her methodology that “mature students’ family lives and concerns are not merely the background against which their educational careers develop, but are integral to their experience of higher education study” (143). The student may also feel guilt for making his or her family deal with so much so that he or she can advance in an educational field. This guilt can affect classroom performance and impede an already disadvantaged

student from succeeding.

With all these difficulties and complications, it's a wonder any non-traditional minority student proves successful in an educational environment. One of main topics of this research is to see what programs are being put in place to assist this increasing population of college students. With the focus that the University of Illinois places on diversity, there are many programs and associations available in terms of ethnic minority. Some of these groups are making the effort to try to assist the non-traditional student as well. The Office of Minority Student Affairs exists to assist and council students of minority status, which includes non-traditional minority students, as they make the transition to a large and diverse university atmosphere. The University of Illinois also houses the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute which encourages learning for the sake of personal gain at any age. OLLI allows those from a senior citizen age group reenter the educational atmosphere and partake in non-credit courses covering various topics.

Researching and interviewing administrative staff at Parkland Community College is where I really found an intensive effort to accommodate the non-traditional minority students' barriers. Foremost in this effort was the creation of the Adult Reentry Center a few years ago. Interviewing an administrative official on this initiative, I found that it is meant to be a "Point of entry for all non-traditional aged students,"

whether these students are entering for the first time, trying to get an associate's degree or just taking courses for personal gain. The Adult Reentry Center counsels incoming non-traditional students, discussing real and perceived barriers and options to get around those barriers. This can help with the intimidating nature of returning to school, especially since Parkland turns no one away that meets the minimum basic adult education requirement. In an interview with the Director of Financial Aid at Parkland Tim Wendt, I found that Parkland allows parents to add childcare costs to cost of attendance to increase financial aid potential. Also, Parkland has made it easy for students to search for financial aid scholarships through Parkland Connection online. By logging in, the students can use the system to automatically find scholarships that they are eligible for and apply for them. Wendt also informed me that Parkland is in the process of creating a group to help veterans returning to the educational environment to assimilate with ease after being away for a period of time. Parkland also has the TRiO program, which allows students to borrow supplies that they need for classes if they cannot afford them, especially electronics such as calculators and audio/video supplies.

Something that both the University of Illinois and Parkland Community College have implemented in their curriculum is online distance learning courses and online hybrid courses. Online distance learning allows

students to do assignments on their computer from home at their convenience, meeting deadlines for assignments by submitting them via the internet. The online hybrid courses minimize the amount of time students need to be at school by putting part of the class work online rather than done in class. Both colleges are also making an effort to help minority students feel more comfortable with the faculty when the students do attend class by increasing the amount of diversity of those on staff. At the University of Illinois, 23 percent of all staff is non-white. (UIUC Student Enrollment, 2008) At Parkland College, 15 percent of the staff falls into this category. (Environmental Scanning Data, 2008) These numbers are also expected to rise.

There are also programs in motion and being considered at a political level to help non-traditional minority students succeed. Hillary Rodham Clinton, while senator for New York, pushed very strongly for a bill called the College Cost Reduction and Access Act. This bill specifically helps working students and raises the Automatic Zero Expected Family Contribution threshold to \$30,000 as well as increases the Pell Grant amount. (Sen. Clinton Applauds Final Passage Of Bill To Increase Student Aid, 2007) Senator Clinton also cosponsored a bill called the Non-traditional Student Success Act. This bill hoped to lessen the financial burdens that often prohibit working people and people with families from continuing their education. Parts of it have already been

approved, but the bill in its entirety has not yet been realized.

The influence of the non-traditional student is becoming prevalent in these two colleges. Parkland has spotlighted students returning to school after time off for various reasons on their course schedule books, guaranteeing that every student attending will see this and realize that Parkland is accepting these students and trying to help them achieve their educational aspirations. Throughout the research of this paper, I have found that the two colleges are making strides in accommodating this ever-growing population of students, especially Parkland Community College. As with making changes for any type of student apart from the “traditional” student, there will always be steps that continue to be taken to improve. According to the Environment Scanning Data report done by Parkland’s Office of Institutional Research, the climate of the college is viewed as “Relaxed, friendly, racially tolerant, supportive, inclusive, sensitive and open-minded.” It would seem that this is the right kind of sentiment one could hope to experience while attempting improve their quality of life through education.

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Discuss:

EUI Links:

Reflect:

Recommendations: It may be a good idea that the University of Illinois follow Parkland Community College's model or at minimum continue to work along with the college to increase program potential for non-traditional minority students. A large portion of students transfer to UIUC, and the environment should continue to be that of an accepting and accommodating educational experience for those who must overcome so many barriers to attain their educational potential.