What's Age Got to Do with It?

How older students, their families, and the institutions

perceive the experience of being a non-traditional graduate student

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Introduction

According to the U. S. Census Bureau (2005), in the next twenty years 20 percent of the U. S. population will be 65 and older. With advances not only in longevity but in quality of life in later years, many Americans in their middle ages are planning on active, productive lives for several more decades. Increasingly, these people are turning to higher education to prepare for new careers in an era characterized by rapid technological advances and a knowledge-based economy that values information literacy. These non-traditional students bring valuable, real-world experience and pragmatic perspectives to their classes. However, they also have unique circumstances, needs, and expectations which most universities have been slow to recognize and address. How must universities change to meet the demands of this growing demographic? How can they ease the transition from full-time employment to full-time study? How can they make best use of these new human resources?

A key finding in a recent study sponsored by the Lumina Foundation for Education was the importance of institutional planning and counseling to adult learners' success in higher education (Pusser et al., 2007). Due to rising enrollments of non-traditional students in higher education, universities need to understand the attitudinal and structural barriers these students face in returning to academia and devise or revise programs and services to support their efforts and promote their success.

The purpose of this study is to bring to light the different circumstances, needs, and expectations of non-traditional doctoral students and their families during their return to academia. Three doctoral students (including the author) collaborated on the design of this study and gathered and analyzed the data collectively. However, each has written his or her own report of the study. Through interviews, observations, document analysis, and other inquiry methods,

we seek to understand the experiences and perspectives of five doctoral students in a school of education at a large, public midwestern university. These students differ in terms of many demographic factors, including gender, ethnicity, marital status, financial status, number of children, etc., but they have in common the fact that they left established careers to pursue residential doctoral studies. I share this characteristic and will draw upon my own experiences to reflect upon and understand the findings.

Why Qualitative Methods Are Used in This Study

The focus of this study is a group of people and their particular experiences, attitudes, motivations, hopes, dreams, and obstacles—all of which are variable, complex, difficult to express, and perhaps impossible to measure in any quantifiable way (Glesne, 2006). When we seek to understand the lives of others, we cannot analyze discrete parts; we need a lens that shows us the whole picture, even if that lens (like all lenses) is imperfect, colored by our own assumptions and biases. There is no objective stance that can be taken to understand human intention. Instead, we must interpret what we encounter using empathy and reflection to achieve a deeper and richer understanding of the phenomena (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

My Personal Relationship to the Topic

Twenty years after completing my first master's degree, I returned to graduate school for a second master's and a new direction in my career as an educator. I had worked in a variety of increasingly technical positions in higher education, and I wanted to move into instructional technology to work with faculty on effectively integrating technology into their teaching. However, soon after starting my program, I decided that I wanted to pursue a doctorate and become a professor. Unfortunately the best Ph.D. programs were not in the San Francisco Bay area where I lived. My wife was born and raised there and had never lived anywhere else, but she

could see that I was passionate about pursuing this goal. We have no children, but we had jobs that paid well and we had saved a decent nest egg. In addition, we sold our house before the economy hit bottom and the university where I was admitted offered me a four-year fellowship that provided tuition and a stipend. Nevertheless, family, friends, and the beauty of central California were difficult to leave behind.

Now that I am a few years into my doctoral studies, it seems to me that my experience has been unique. While some of my peers complain about the workload, time commitment, stress, and financial burden of graduate school, I relish the challenges and opportunities that have come my way. This study has been a way for me better to understand my experience by gaining some insight into the perspectives and lives of others.

Research Questions

This study was initiated to investigate the experience of being a non-traditional student who has left a career to pursue a doctorate in a full-time, residential program. In particular, I am interested in the perceived effects of this decision on the students and their families. I hope to offer some ideas for how universities might better support non-traditional students in this endeavor. My research questions are:

1. How do non-traditional doctoral students with previous careers describe the experience of transitioning to a full-time doctoral program?

2. How do those students and their family members describe the effects on family life and relationships?

3. What do those students and their families think the university could do to support them better in their return to academia?

Research Methods

This study took place at a large, public midwestern university. The five participants were purposefully selected to meet the criterion of having entered a doctoral program in the School of Education after working several years to establish a career. All were female and ranged in age from late 20s to late 50s. One had no children, while the others had children ranged in age from infant to adult. All were familiar with the inquiry course for which this study was undertaken and participated with the knowledge that our reports would not be submitted for publication.

Because the researchers are doctoral students in the same School of Education as the participants, we are long-term participants who briefly became participant-observers, and inevitably we compared and contrasted our own experiences to understand those of our participants. We used a variety of techniques to gather our data. Each researcher conducted one or two structured interviews "to learn about what [we] cannot see" (Glesne, 2006, p. 81). During these interviews, we began by asking participants to remember back to when they first decided to pursue a doctorate. We then structured our questions to lead the participants from that time forward to the present, asking them first to talk about discussions with family members and early concerns. Then we asked them to consider how their experience has been different than what they expected, what difficulties they had encountered, and what they might have done differently in hindsight. We ended by asking them what the university might have done to support them.

One researcher conducted an observation of a participant in order to gather data for comparison with the participant's statements in the interview. This enabled us to see discrepancies between the participant's perception and actions. We also collected various artifacts from participants, including calendars, to-do lists, and course syllabi (to get a sense of workload and time management), and pictures (to see what the participant felt represented life as a graduate student). To understand the university's perspective, we examined orientation

materials that we received when we started our programs and the School of Education website,

searching for information and services intended to assist students in non-academic ways.

Our data analysis was somewhat problematic in that each of us was absent from class for

various reasons during this phase of our study. Like our participants, we each have

responsibilities and commitments that made it difficult for all of us to meet at the same time.

Two of us developed some initial, rudimentary coding schemes (Glesne, 2006). Unfortunately I

was presenting at a conference during the week in which my fellow researchers proceeded to

synthesize our data and tease out the common themes. I was not able to discuss these themes in

detail with them, so I analyzed the data and the other researchers' analyses separately to try to

make my own sense. This was not an ideal approach, but I think I made the best of the situation.

It certainly emphasized to me how difficult it can be to understand the thought processes of

others who are interpreting the same data.

I wanted to experiment with non-traditional methods of sense-making in relation to my

data, so I wrote the following poetic transcription (Glesne, 2006) based on the interview with

Sally. I read through the transcript and selected words that I felt were related to key themes of

her experience. Then I rearranged and revised them slightly to create something that I think in a

way captures the essence of her experience as related through our interview.

> When I started the program I didn't know
> that I would have a child.
> I underestimated the challenges that would bring,
>   the demands on my own health,
>   going on very little sleep last year,
>   being pulled in so many directions.
> The time apart was, is a concern,
>   physically separated,
>   always having to maintain our relationship.
> I wanted to quit several times.
> What has really kept my family together and strong
>   is our faith.

Frankly, I was surprised at how effective this was in helping me to get at the heart of the interview. However, in a sense it is simply a variation of rudimentary coding since all I did was search for key phrases and then arrange them to express my emerging understanding of the data.

While I don't want to minimize the importance of considering ethical issues, this study was so brief and unobtrusive that I think there was little need for concern. I would have been more concerned if I were also talking separately with participants' family members. The two participants I recruited and interviewed had both taken qualitative inquiry courses and so were familiar with the methods and practices.

On the other hand, researcher subjectivity was and is an ongoing issue. In my reflexive journal I noted that I know both of the participants fairly well, which I think influenced both their responses to my questions and my understanding of their responses. For example, at the time of our interview Terri's mother had taken a turn for the worse in her fight against cancer (and a couple of weeks later she died). Terri had previously told me about her mother's condition, but she barely alluded to it during our interview. Was that because she knew that I knew and therefore she did not feel the need to elaborate? Should I have tried to coax more out of her because I felt it was an important contributor to her feelings of stress and her need to visit her family so frequently? How could I be sure I wasn't projecting how I would feel if I were in her situation? As a participant who has suddenly become a participant-observer, how do I know where to draw the line?

Findings

A key theme that emerged in this study is the amount of stress that these non-traditional doctoral students feel. That may not seem surprising; they are, after all, involved in an enterprise that requires a significant commitment of time, effort, and expense. Many students never make it

to or through the dissertation to obtain their degrees. But to understand what makes the experience of being a non-traditional doctoral student distinctive, we must consider the complex factors that create that stress.

One of those factors is workload, and not only the amount of work but the type. As Shirley said, "The workload is heavier than I thought. The reading is heavier…. Right now I feel like there is minimally spare time." Even though these students have previous work experience and are familiar with the pressures of full-time employment, most are undertaking positions as teachers and researchers that require the development of new skills and dispositions. Furthermore, their family members may not realize the pressure that they are under.

Terri: I think my sister doesn't have an understanding of the workload. She never understands why every time I come home I have work with me. She always gives me a very hard time about putting away my work.

Similarly, Wanda reported that her young daughter complained, "This stupid doctoral program's taking all your time." The workload and time commitment combined with a lack of understanding and support from family members adds to the stress that these students feel.

Another significant factor is finances. Again, this is not surprising because education is expensive. However, in most cases these non-traditional students have sacrificed well-paying jobs with benefits in order to return to full-time studies. Ronnie reported giving up her pension. Terri lamented how these years in school were affecting her savings for retirement because compound interest is most effective if you save while you are young. In addition, she and her husband were now living on one income instead of two. When he lost his job, she knew they couldn't afford to live on her graduate stipend. On the other hand, Wanda had saved a lot of money over the years and so felt less stress related to her financial situation. My own experience

suggests advantages and disadvantages. My wife and I were making over $150,000 a year when I decided to return to school. While we had saved enough to live on for several years, it is unlikely that either of us will make as much money as we were making then. I will have to be a professor in education for many years before I attain my previous salary as a technology specialist. In some cases, lost potential earnings can contribute to stress as much as debt.

Another aspect of finances is the expense of having a family. Traditional students are less likely to be married and to have children. Sally got pregnant two months after starting her doctoral program, and she had not anticipated the cost of childcare:

> Sally: I feel the childcare situation isn't as good as it could be. The university's is full-
> time only and costs $1,000 a month, which is quite steep for a student who makes around
> $14,000 a year before taxes.

Sally's husband couldn't afford to leave his job and sell their house in Kentucky, so she was renting a room in Bloomington, which was an additional expense. Terri had a similar arrangement for a year when she and her husband were living in Indianapolis for his job. Ronnie also had to live apart from her husband and son for a year, until she finally said, "Look, this isn't going to work—two houses, two sets of furniture, two cars, two sets of budgeting."

Not only did living apart create financial stress on these students, but it also created emotional stress. Another recurring theme was the different forms of separation that these students experienced. In addition to those situations described above, Terri expressed concerns about her and her husband being so far from their aging parents and feeling the need to spend precious time driving to and from Michigan on the weekends. Shirley also expressed frustration because one of the reasons she chose this university was to be closer to her elderly parents in northern Indiana. Yet she rarely has time to make the trip up there.

Shirley: I made the choice of Indiana to stay close to the family but I'm finding that I

don't have time to see the family. I don't have time to make that six hour commute up

into Fort Wayne. On some of the weekends I don't want to do it 'cause I have so much

homework to do and projects to do.

While the difficulties experienced by non-traditional students who are returning to school seem

similar to those of traditional students, a deeper examination of the factors that create those

problems reveals a different set of issues.

Implications

With so many middle-aged and older people turning to higher education to prepare for

new careers, universities need to consider their unique circumstances, needs, and expectations.

Because these institutions are experiencing their own financial difficulties due to decreases in

funding, simply paying graduate students larger stipends to lessen their financial concerns seems

unlikely. However, there may be more affordable solutions to alleviate some of the factors that

result in feelings of stress.

An examination of orientation materials and the School of Education website found little

information and services intended to assist students with non-academic problems. Certainly there

is lots of information about financing one's education. But taking on debt does little to alleviate

concern about financing one's retirement. It might be helpful to offer financial counseling that

targets the concerns of older students. Furthermore, students with young children could be

offered more affordable and flexible options for childcare. And finally, to address the

surprisingly common problem of students being separated from their spouses and children,

perhaps the university could assist spouses in finding local jobs.

To its credit, the university offers Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS), for which a brochure is included in the School of Education's orientation materials. Yet I wonder how many non-traditional students are aware of it and, more to the point, have the time to schedule an appointment between 8:00 a.m. and 4:30 p.m.

Strengths and Weaknesses of this Study

As might be expected of a "practice" study that was conducted with an eye toward speed and convenience, the strengths are few and the weaknesses many. It has been said that there is strength in numbers, and having three of us working together enabled us to gather more data than we would have been able to collect individually. Glesne (2006) says that having multiple investigators is a form of triangulation, which should add to the credibility of our results (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). However, we were not able to discuss and interpret our data as a group as much as we should have to strengthen the trustworthiness of our interpretations.

We did attempt to get multiple forms of data as well, but it would have been better to have, for example, multiple interviews with each participant, interviews with spouses, observations of participants in their day-to-day lives, and other methods that would have provided a richer set of data. Also, after reading Miller (2008) I think it would have been interesting and appropriate to incorporate elements of autoethnography into this study. Furthermore, after writing this report I have a better understanding of what he meant by "writing as a method of inquiry" (p. 348). I learned things about my participants and about myself as I was writing this report.

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