Implications of the Community College Taxonomy on Institutions Implementing: Achieving the Dream in Michigan

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Abstract: The Community College Taxonomy (CCT) study produced a “classification scheme” which describes community college students’ intentions according to how “directed” they are toward completing one of three program tracks. An implication of the CCT’s results is that older students in the moderately and not directed categories are less likely to persist after their first year, transfer to a 4-year institution, or obtain an associate degree or certificate. Age was found to be statistically significant; students 30 and over constituted the lowest percentage of strongly directed students in all three tracks. One attribute of the nontraditional student segment was that strongly directed older students were more likely to be retained than their moderately directed counterparts. Based on these conclusions, the researcher designed the current study to explore the experiences of strongly directed older students who attend a community college that has implemented the Achieving the Dream program. The researcher found that nontraditional students have the potential of becoming very “strongly-directed” once initial challenges are alleviated with supportive services provided by the college. For nontraditional students, whose situational conditions may vary throughout their college experience, a classification captured at one particular time is not a reliable description a student’s intention toward completing a degree.

The Community College Taxonomy

The thrust of the Community College Taxonomy (CCT) was “to examine the 3-year outcomes of the most recent national cohort of first-time community college students” between 2003 and 2006 (Horn & Weko, 2009, p. iii). The CCT sample included 5800 students from the most recent Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study (2006), which represents all first-time undergraduates. The average age was 24 years with 20% who were 30 or older. The CCT proposes a “classification scheme” which describes community college students’ intentions according to how “directed” they seemed toward completing one of three formal program tracks outlined as: transfer to a 4-year institution; complete an associate degree; or obtain a certificate. The scheme included “strongly directed,” “moderately directed” and “not directed” student classifications based on self-reported intentions to complete any one of the three tracks, enrollment and attendance status. The criterion for the classification schemes were crafted to fit community colleges where the majority of the students attend part time and are likely to have other life priorities, such as dependents and full-time work.

Research Interest

The researcher was interested in the Community College Taxonomy (CCT) because of her interest in nontraditional students’ transition to community college. In light of the fact that community college completion rates tend to be low (Bailey et al., 2005), the researcher was
looking for data that would illuminate the recent efforts to improve the retention and persistence of nontraditional students. Achieving the Dream (ATD) is a national program designed to improve completion rates and facilitate the transition to college. In 2010 Michigan added 10 community colleges to the list of 7 that are participating in the ATD initiative (Michigan Community College Association, 2010). This is an indication that community college administrators and faculty are concerned about the performance of their students and they are focusing an effort to improve completion rates. At institutions where there are large proportions of nontraditional students, the ATD strategies are helping adults, particularly those with severe developmental education needs, such as dislocated workers, overcome obstacles in transitioning to college.

However, data from the CCT imply that more of the older students in the sample were classified as “moderately” or “not directed” and were less likely to transfer to a 4-year institution, obtain an associate degree or certificate. Though the CCT has empirical evidence to support this implication, it does not offer information that explains why older students were more likely in the moderately or not directed classifications. It does state that within the limitations of the study “unmeasured factors may underlie the associations between variables included in the study, and there may be more complex interactions among variables that are not examined in this report” (Horn & Weko, 2009, p. iii). The researcher wondered if community colleges that have implemented the ATD programs are addressing any of the possible “unmeasured factors,” which could be related to why so many older students were reported as moderately or not directed. More importantly, what is the impact of the ATD strategies on strongly-directed students?

**The Taxonomy's Implications**

A major implication of the CCT’s (2009) results is that older students in the moderately and not directed categories are less likely to persist after the first year, persist through the third year, transfer to a 4-year institution or obtain an associate degree or certificate. Age was a statistically significant factor: students in the oldest age group (30 or older) constituted 12% of the strongly directed students, 27% of moderately directed and 41% of the not directed students; and “students age 30 or older constituted a lower percentage of strongly directed than of moderately directed students in all three tracks” (p. 11). In regard to persisting beyond the first year, most students cited reasons were either “financial” or “other,” reported by about 30% of first-year leavers and among the not directed students; 29.5% for other reasons, 33.9 % for financial reasons; and 39.2% for personal reasons (p. 34). The CCT did not provide any details about “other reasons” or “personal reasons,” so it is inferred that these factors are some of the unmeasured variables which were not part of the study. The only positive result for the nontraditional student segment was that strongly directed older students were more likely to be retained than their moderately directed counterparts. And those that are strongly directed appeared to be better prepared academically than their peers classified as moderately directed or not directed. Based on the CCT’s conclusions, the researcher wanted to know whether strongly directed older students, who are attending community colleges that have the ATD program, exhibit similar behavior.
The Current Study

Methodology

The purpose of the current study is: to explore the transitions of nontraditional students to college; to examine the “unmeasured factors” and “complex interactions” that affect older students’ persistence; and to answer the following research questions:

• What are the personal characteristics of “strongly directed” nontraditional students who have completed their first year of community college?

• What are the institutional characteristics that have facilitated the “strongly directed” nontraditional students’ transition during their first year?

A qualitative case study methodology was employed with the use of phenomenologically based interviewing, which produces more in-depth life stories of the participants (Seidman, 2006). The first part of the research is an exploration of personal characteristics affecting motivation among students using the CCT’s (2009) definition of students who are considered “strongly directed” toward one of the three program tracks. An understanding of the students’ personal motivations and elements of their transition process was gained through 45 minute, tape-recorded, face-to-face interviews. In the second part, the opinions about students’ transitions and developmental education innovations were explored with faculty and administrators also through 45 minute, tape-recorded, face-to-face interviews. The interview questions were related to the five goals and four targeted areas of institutional improvement as outlined in the Achieving the Dream Field Guide (2009).

The main college chosen for the current study (Case A) has participated in the ATD program since 2007. Two additional schools were included because they were in varying stages of implementing the ATD program. Case B has developed the ATD strategy framework and will be rolling out the implementation in the fall of 2010. Case C recently adopted the ATD initiative and is in the strategic planning stage. The researcher felt that by looking at schools in varying stages of implementation, a more comprehensive view of the ATD initiative could be obtained.

The interview participants were recruited on site once permission was granted by the appropriate administrator. For Case A, students who were visiting a resource center were asked to participate. The interviews were conducted a private office. For Case C, the participant was recruited at a campus café. Permission was not granted for Case B. The 45 minute interview format provided ample time for the participant to give thoughtful responses to the questions. Each participant was given a $10 restaurant card. The tape-recorded interviews were transcribed and uploaded for analysis in QSR NVivo8. The responses were coded manually to include certain categories which were not specifically named in the interview responses, such as “transition process” and “adjustment.” Other codes were created from the frequency of certain text or phrases, such as “use of technology” and “intimidation” automatically. Queries were attempted to show special connections among the categories but, because there were so few sources from which to draw, the associations were not considered analytically meaningful.

A limitation of the study was the number of institutions that could be examined during the short research period of 6 weeks. Another limitation was the availability student participants from Cases B & C because of the institutions’ status in implementing the ATD program. Although the number of participants is small, the researcher found the in-depth information that she was seeking through the interviews of students, faculty and administrators from Case A. The continuation of this study will include returning to Case B and C as well as adding other institutions that are further along in the implementation of ATD. A desired outcome would be a
comparison of the interview responses and identifying distinct patterns of student and institutional characteristics across multiple cases.

**Findings**

For Case A, three students were interviewed. All of the participants are over age 40, had completed their first-year, were enrolled for the upcoming semester, and could be classified as strongly directed students. Two administrators were interviewed, a dean and a director, and one full-time faculty member. There were no students for Case B and one interview with a dean. There was one student for Case C who is 35 years old and was continuously enrolled for two years, but did not complete the degree, transfer or receive a certificate. One administrator was interviewed for Case C, a director of student services. The answer to the research questions were derived from participants responses.

First, why do nontraditional students have trouble transitioning and persisting through their first year of community college? The students reported a lack of confidence, a fear of change, and never being challenged in the way college is a challenge. They also report difficulties in navigating the college systems, i.e. registration, financial aid, advocating for themselves and seeking assistance. One dean said “they have a sense of being kind of outside of the education experience.” Another dean explained it as “because you are already taking them out of the context of life, new contacts, new people and new stuff to navigate.” She also expressed “the other challenge that I hear is the work after school. With a job you go home and with school you go home and do homework.” The faculty member and the students echoed a similar sentiment. The director of the student service center described a transition problem in the context of learning how to use the computer. She said “they didn’t know how to use the mouse, didn’t know how to use Word, didn’t know what that little cursor thing was, didn’t know how to set margins. This can send them right over the edge.” She went on to say “not only were they stressed with losing a job, not having a job or training for a new job or having a lot of responsibilities, not having computer skills was the last straw.” Her comment illustrates how one difficulty can be compounded into a total feeling of defeat, which is why many older students start at community college completely terrified and unsure how they will do it. But in spite of these challenges, many do persevere.

Second, what are the personal characteristics of strongly-directed nontraditional students? These are the students that have overcome the initial “shock” of going to college. The researcher observed how the students talked about their adjustment period. When talking about the “dark days,” as one student referred to it, their voices became barely audible. And when they started talking about how things are going for them now, the volume went way up, their body position changed and the tone of their voice sounded more cheerful. The students explained that going to college made them feel proud and confident. They also exhibit diligence, curiosity and a sense of commitment. One student said “I am ambitious now. I must make sure I get good grades.” Another expressed “You have to keep pushing yourself.” And another exclaimed “You start finding out you can do things that you didn’t really think you could do. But it does take sacrifice. I think I feel better about myself.” All of the students recognize that going to college has not been easy, but they have embraced it and are eager to continue. A students who described herself as a former addict said “Honestly, it’s a struggle, but I feel good about me going through this struggle. I think I’ve learned how to help myself and how to get resources and how to search for resources.” For one student, there have been certain epiphanies, such as “Honestly, one of the things that I learned is that, if you are struggling, you need to ask for help.”
The faculty and administrators also notice the change in students who struggle initially, but manage to continue. A dean commented, “But by gosh they persist and they do pretty well in their classes!” This same dean talked about the performance of nontraditional students. She said “…what I’m getting at is that the older student does persist higher than average and their cumulative grade point average is 3.13 overall. The overall GPA for this school is like 2.0. So they are doing better and they are persisting better.” She further explained “You can see them as students and when we give them a clear direction, goals and support they use all that. They parlay the resources and use of them and they follow the advice.” The success of the nontraditional students at this institution is attributed to the efforts of the faculty and administration that have used the ATD tools to create strategies aimed specifically at this student segment.

Third, what are the institutional characteristics that have facilitated the “strongly directed” nontraditional students’ transition? The greatest resource is having one place where students can access multiple services such as tutoring, counseling services, computers, printers, and other students. Nontraditional students thrive in a guided environment, whether it is the cohort based or learning community models, they perform better when they are familiar with their surroundings. Other important services are targeted orientations that are mandatory, advisory check-ins throughout the year, and supplemental instructors who are in the classroom and who are also available for tutoring outside of class. As a faculty member expressed “The adjustment [to college] for learning community students is easier than students who are not in a guided environment.” A director agreed by offering “Certainly, they feel stronger in school in the cohort-based community.” A faculty member commented on the student service center “they are not going to show up at the tutor center unless they know somebody who says, yes this is a cool place” And a student gave an example how she used the center “when I started to feel stressed with home and balancing, I was able to sit down with a social worker and make a plan.” This student has been able to stick to her plan. She has successfully completed all of the prerequisites and she is moving into the nursing program in the fall. She credits her success to the people in the student center who helped her through the initial difficulties.

Lastly, an interesting facet of the only student from Case C is that upon entry into college this student would have been initially classified as strongly directed. Because of institutional limitations and changes in the spouse’s employment (forces beyond the students’ control), the student’s classification at the time of the interview was not directed. If this student were part of the CCT study sample, she would be an example of how factors that would be considered “complex interactions” can affect a student’s classification.

**Conclusion**

A study of the transitions of nontraditional students is especially relevant because of the current economic climate in the US (and Michigan) where many institutions have implemented educational reforms to educate large populations of unemployed and displaced workers (Carnevale, 2009). The current study exemplifies the research-to-practice efforts of faculty and administrators at a community college in Michigan where the implementation of the ATD program has shown some success. Because of the potential inferences that could be made about older students, the researcher is concerned about the implications of the CCT’s results. The CCT did not compare the strongly directed older students (over 30) with the strongly directed younger students (18-24) to determine if age has an impact among students with similar intentions. Nor
does the CCT offer any evidence of student performance within any of the classifications or across age groups. The current study’s results show that once initial challenges are alleviated with supportive services provided by the college, nontraditional students have the potential of becoming very “strongly-directed.” An examination of students with similar motivations and intentions within each of the classifications would be an interesting topic for a future study.

References


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