Breaking the Mold: Supporting Post-Traditional Students

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Higher education was originally intended for a specific student type known today as the traditional student (McFadden, 2011). Traditional students, as defined by McFadden (2011), are those students within the 18-25 age demographic who pursue college immediately following high school. Currently, more individuals are returning to higher education to create better job opportunities for themselves, further their education, and/or achieve personal goals (Bye, Pushkar, & Conway, 2007; Kasworm, 2003; Rabourn et al., 2018; Tumuheki, Zeelen, & Openjuru, 2016). Within this study, this population is identified as post-traditional students, who tend to be older than the "traditional" college aged student.

As post-traditional student presence is increasing on college campuses, traditional support systems must shift to meet the needs associated with this growing population (Soares, 2013; Soares et al., 2016). Research has shown that post-traditional students have needs that are unique of their traditional student counterparts (Kasworm, 2003; Rabourn et al., 2018; Wyatt, 2011). Within this study, the term post-traditional student will be used when referring to nontraditional or adult students. The term nontraditional implies this population is an aberration from the "norm" that has been instilled in the higher education setting, rather than the persevering individual identity (Soares, 2013). Ogren (2003) added that, "colleges and universities traditionally have not served people like them" (p. 641). As such, traditional student services may not always fit the needs of post-traditional students. In response, some institutions have created academic programs specifically geared towards post-traditional adult students to close some of the gaps in services. Given this information, the following research questions guided this study:

1. What, if any, are the differences in the experiences of those who identify as post-traditional students enrolled in traditional undergrad programs versus those enrolled in programs designed to specifically serve post-traditional adult students?
2. What are the institutional responses that either help or hinder these students' sense of belonging within their respective programs?

Literature Review

The National Center for Education Statistics (2009) reported that post-traditional students comprise approximately 38.2% of the postsecondary population, yet this group of students is often neglected on higher education campuses (Chen, 2017). An American Council for Education (ACE) survey found that over 40% of institutions indicated that they "did not identify older adult students for purposes of outreach, programs and services, or financial aid" (Lakin, Mullane, & Robinson, 2008, p. 12). The Lumina Foundation (2012) aims to increase the percentage of adults in America who hold a two or four-year college degree from 39% to 60% by the year 2025. However, they have noted that the nation will fall short of its intended goal if the focus is solely on traditional-aged students. McFadden (2011) stressed that it is one thing to

know that more adult students are accessing higher education, but it is another to understand how higher education professionals can better serve this population to promote retention. The data from this study shows the need for greater attention to the post-traditional student population, a diverse population that is breaking the traditional mold.

Defining the Post-Traditional Student Identity

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (2009) defined nontraditional adult students as undergraduate students with at least one of the following seven identifiers: (1) delayed enrollment into postsecondary education, (2) part-time enrollment, (3) financially independent, (4) works full-time, (5) has dependents other than a spouse, (6) is a single parent, (7) lacks a standard high school diploma (Choy, 2002). Nontraditional students with at least two identifiers receive their bachelor's degree at a rate of 16.9 percent, as opposed to traditional students at 53.9 percent (Rabourn et al., 2015)

According to the 2011-2012 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS), post-traditional students have been a consistent and significant presence in higher education, equating to almost 60 percent of the undergraduate population. Soares et al. (2017) highlighted that during the 2011-2012 academic year 13.3 million out of the total of 23.1 million undergraduates enrolled in two- and four-year colleges and universities identify as post-traditional students. Although this population is increasing, their needs have gone unnoticed and unattended as most institutions are not equipped to handle them. Kasworm (2010) mentions that unlike traditional undergraduates, post-traditional students are rarely, if ever, just fulfilling an undergraduate student role at their institution, they hold many other roles in their lives that take precedents. Because this population is so unique, higher ed professionals need to understand the differences they have from their traditional counterparts as to better identify how services can adapt to fit the needs of post-traditional students.

Post-Traditional vs. Traditional Student Needs

Although both populations may attend the same colleges or universities, they differ in various aspects of the college experience. Not only do they differ based on the characteristics that categorize them into their two unique populations, but they also differ inside and outside the classroom (Kasworm, 2003; Rabourn et al., 2018; Wyatt, 2011). Post-traditional students are more likely than their traditional counterparts to ask questions in class, contribute to the classroom discussion, prepare drafts and revise their papers, and are less likely to come to class unprepared with unfinished assignments (Kasworm, 2003; Rabourn et al., 2018; Wyatt, 2011). In contrast to that, post-traditional students are less likely to be engaged in social or volunteer activities on their campuses. Another unique difference is how these two populations select the types of institutions they want to attend. Post-traditional students typically enroll in a college that is readily accessible because of the other priorities, obligations, and commitments they have in their lives (Kasworm, 2003). Post-traditional students also pursue flexible educational offerings such as online classes or part-time status because of their busy schedules and will typically commute to campus as opposed to live in the residence halls.

When compared to younger traditional students, post-traditional students have reported greater intrinsic motivation for learning. These motivations tend to be higher for post-traditional

students because they typically have been away from school and are choosing to return as opposed to traditional-aged students who enroll in post-secondary education right after high school. Intrinsic motivations for post-traditional students are personal growth, career growth, and interest in learning new material (Kasworm, 2003; Tumuheki et al., 2016). Extrinsic motivations can be both individual or non-individual and include societal perceptions, desire to fit in, be better, change their narrative, provide for their family, prove worth, and service loved ones (Kasworm, 2003; Tumuheki et al., 2016). However, this increased motivation did not always transfer to confidence in the classroom (Bye et al., 2007; Kasworm, 2003; Rabourn et al., 2018; Tumuheki et al., 2016). Overall, the main themes within motivations for post-traditional students include personal transitions and change, proactive life planning, or a mix of both motivators (Kasworm, 2003; Rabourn et al., 2018; Tumuheki et al., 2016). Because of higher levels of motivation, Carney-Compton (2003) mentioned that post-traditional students performed at higher academic levels than traditional students even though they had more extracurricular stressors (e.g. familial responsibilities).

Given this difference, we must direct our attention accordingly to see that the post-traditional student has a unique set of needs that cannot be met by sticking to traditional methods. Sticking to the traditional method will not cut it for a population that is growing in the higher education environment. To adapt to the changing demographics, crafting programs and services geared towards serving the post-traditional student population can help increase retention and persistence toward degree completion for this population. However, Kazis et al. (2007) emphasized that higher education institutions at the two- and four- year level continue to create- and adhere to- policies that privilege or favor traditional-aged students. Wyatt (2011) added that the integration and inclusion of post-traditional students will require putting students first and changing current institutional models to reflect one that considers the needs of all college students. This can be done in the form of creating specialized programs and services for post-traditional students.

How institutions go about lowering barriers for post-traditional student engagement falls into four rough categories: (1) Type A- adult-accommodating, (2) Type B- adult-oriented, (3) Type C- adult-ignoring, and (4) Type D- adult-added (Hagedorn, 2015). Adult-accommodation refers to the idea that the institution alters its mission and curriculum to serve the post-traditional student (Hagedorn, 2015). Adult-oriented is predominantly serving post-traditional students and their mission is focused on serving that population. Adult-ignoring has its focus firmly set on serving traditional students, which includes post-traditional students but with limited access or resources (Hagedorn, 2015). Adult-added is a step above adult ignored, but the focus is still not on adult students when creating policies and procedures, but rather adding them into the mix after the fact (Hagedorn, 2015). Understanding how a university serves post-traditional students can determine areas for growth and improvement to diversify the institution. Because of the limited time post-traditional students have for outside obligations, they will be drawn towards schools that can accommodate their unique needs. Aside from the adult-oriented institutions, all institutions should reflect on the barriers their post-traditional students might be facing that can be lowered. Institutional barriers can include a lack of classes at convenient times, prohibitive cost of classes and supplies, limited textbook access, lack of financial aid and scholarships, extra resources at inconvenient times, and lack of family-inclusive engagement opportunities (Hagedorn, 2015; Rabourn et al., 2018). Understanding and removing these barriers can help

promote success among the post-traditional student population.

Benefits of Post-Traditional Specific Programs

Because post-traditional students have their own unique needs in the higher education environment, it becomes evident that customized resources and services need to be in place to serve this student population. Hagedorn (2015) continued to expand on this institution type framework by creating the "Square Pegs analogy" (p. 312). This analogy highlights the idea that older students who are being integrated into an environment designed for traditional students can be similar to trying to fit a square peg into a round hole (Hagedorn, 2015). Because post-traditional students do not fit the traditional mold, it creates a "misalignment that produces four corners of friction: access, success, retention, and institutional receptivity" (Hagedorn, 2015, p. 312). Creating and implementing programs geared specifically for adult students can remove areas of friction and create services that are adult-oriented and adult-accommodating. Gast (2013) mentioned that there are many barriers post-traditional students face when trying to return to higher education, but it is important to understand that once post-traditional students are recruited, they need to be provided with specialized support services and have access to staff and faculty who recognize their unique needs and busy lifestyles. Edirisingha (2009) added that post-traditional students are more likely to drop out than their younger counterparts, and they tend to have the lowest completion figures.

It is important to understand that there are a wide range of options that have been piloted and assessed to determine what works when it comes to supporting post-traditional students. Gast (2013) highlighted that some avenues to consider include: online degree programs, hybrid degree programs, accelerated degree programs, mentor programs, and adult student support services offices. Adult student services offices on campus can be a way for post-traditional students to gain access to resources that support them in being successful in their academic goals. Cross (1981) mentioned that post-traditional students must address multiple considerations to be successful, balanced students; childcare, commuting, finances, class schedules that work around childcare and after-school activities, part-time or full-time employment, orientation to the campus, and introduction to available support services. Fairchild (2003) suggested that because of all the details post-traditional students need to consider, the professional staff must explore that campus and community, educate themselves of various resources, and coordinate referrals for post-traditional students. Leaving this information seeking to the students themselves can become overwhelming and an added stress with their limited time both on campus and juggling their various responsibilities. Support services offices for post-traditional students need to consider the unique needs this population of students have. Fairchild (2003) added that it is important for offices to be open at alternative hours, be located on a popular part of campus that is easy to access and continue to spread awareness campus-wide of the unique needs of this population. These adjustments can create a stronger impression on the post-traditional student experience and create a welcoming environment that allows individuals who identify with this population to feel confident in reaching out for assistance.

Methodology

This study utilized a qualitative case study design (Mertler, 2019). According to Mertler (2019), the purpose of the case study approach is to develop a highly detailed description and gain a thorough understanding of the individual entity that the researcher is studying. In the case of this research design, there were two individual cases analyzed: the first case was specifically looking at students' experience in one adult degree program (ADP), and the second case focused on adult students' experience in the traditional undergraduate program (TUG) at the same four-year private institution.

I obtained a list of potential participants through the Educational Effectiveness and Institutional Research (EEIR) office on campus. I chose to gather the participant information through EEIR as they are the main data collecting resource on the campus. Potential participants were invited to join via email that included a brief introduction to the study. All focus group sessions were audio recorded after receiving consent from participants. A total of ten questions were asked during the focus group that covered themes such as academic support, availability of resources, and inclusion/validation of their unique identity within their program. Within this study, I had a total of five participants (see Table 1). To protect the identity of the participants, I assigned an alias to each of them.

Positionality

At the time of the study, I was an employee of the institution where the research was conducted. I served as a counselor in TUG and a counseling intern in ADP. In my professional roles, I only worked with a specific alphabet caseload of students, and when obtaining data, I requested that EEIR remove students who fell within my assigned caseload to avoid bias and coercion towards those students. Having worked in both roles in different capacities I saw the nuanced differences between the TUG and ADP programs.

Table 1: Participant Demographics

Alias	Program	Major	Age	Sex	Ethnicity	Standing
David	TUG	Business	35	Male	Hispanic	Senior
Vanessa	TUG	Sociology	27	Female	Hispanic	Junior
Frank	ADP	Psychology	37	Male	Pacific Islander	Senior
Evan	ADP	Business & Comp Sci	34	Male	Hispanic	First year
Victoria	ADP	Psychology	40	Female	Hispanic	First year

Limitations

A limitation of this study was the limited number of participants. Only having two students representing the post-traditional student experience in TUG is only a small percentage of this student population. Another limitation that contributed to this was the COVID-19 pandemic. Data collection began right before the social distancing orders and made participants hesitant to join. One session had to be conducted over the phone which also made it difficult in the data collection process.

Data Analysis

Based on the research questions and the analysis of the focus group data, two main themes emerged for this population: (1) the differences in experiences that post-traditional student felt in their respective programs and (2) the institutional responses (both positive and negative) toward including the post-traditional population. Within these two larger themes, there are subthemes that highlight the experiences of both groups in this research study.

Post-Traditional Student Experiences in TUG Program

In analyzing the data from the focus group sessions, both David and Vanessa shared insights on their perceived identity as post-traditional students in TUG. Within this theme, some main points that emerged were feelings of isolation and lack of inclusion (primarily because they did not see other students similar in age to themselves), differing responsibilities and motivation from their younger peers (mainly because they had outside obligations such as children and jobs to prioritize), and lastly, the conflict of their own identity due to the fact they were grouped with their younger counterparts.

Feelings of Isolation and Lack of Inclusion

Not seeing representation of post-traditional students in their classes was detrimental to their student experience. David mentioned that for him, the feelings of isolation in his class made it harder for him to ask for help. He talked about this fear of not feeling comfortable asking questions or asking for assistance because he felt this stigma that his age correlated with his knowledge and that he should know the answers. Vanessa added that when she felt she was the only "older" student in the classroom, it brought up not only feelings of isolation, but also feelings of doubt in her abilities to be successful in her classes.

The participants also mentioned how they feel there is a lack of inclusion on the campus and that the events and programs that are present are geared more towards younger students. David said: "…[W]ith our priorities and other responsibilities, you don't particularly isolate yourself, but you see what is offered, and compared to everything else we have going on, … it's not a good use of my time as an older student." Similarly, as a parent, Vanessa said, "When I have to look at the events and see, oh, they're doing a movie night, it would be nice ... but is [my daughter] even allowed to come?" These experiences noted that although the school does provide programs and engagement opportunities, they may not always seem inclusive of the post-traditional student and their unique needs.

Differing Motivations from Younger Peers

Both Vanessa and David spoke directly about their shared experiences around having varied motivations around going to college that differed from their traditional-aged peers. David started by sharing, "I noticed that the priorities for some of the younger students are completely different. I don't think they prioritize school as much. And then me, I just need to get it done because I'm getting older." Vanessa added on that school is a priority for her, but mentioned:

> …because I have a daughter and I'm also married, and I help out my mom a lot with foster children, it really is hard for me to decide if I want to study or make dinner for my family or go grocery shopping. It's hard to find the time to balance school and home life, especially parenting.

Both participants have made sacrifices to return to school and earn their degree, and because of this, they shared that their motivations and priorities differ from their traditional classmates. Both David and Vanessa agreed that for them, they did not choose to go to college for the experience, but rather solely to get the degree.

Conflict of Their Own Identity

For Vanessa, returning to school was daunting and she felt as though she was the only one who identified as an "older" student compared to her peers. These feelings started even before her first day of classes. She felt excluded and different from everyone else when she was attending the new student orientation that was scheduled to last five days with activities ranging from as early as 7:30 am to as late as 10:00 pm, a "schedule not ideal for a parent". For Vanessa, she mentioned, "I felt really out of place. I thought I was the only one." Within the focus group session, Vanessa brought up an interesting concept: that she feels like her identity as a post-traditional student is not fully seen, but rather it is generalized with the personalities and identities of the traditional students.

When asked what is one thing they would like people to know about being a post-traditional student in a traditional setting, both Vanessa and David spoke to wanting to feel seen individually. David answered by saying, "Just knowing what makes us a little different than everyone else." Vanessa added, "Just acknowledgement that I'm not what's considered a traditional student. My parents aren't paying for [school]. I'm not fresh out of high school. I'm not under 24 years old but there is more to me than just my age."

Post-Traditional Student Experiences in ADP Program

For the students in the ADP program, Frank, Victoria, and Evan all shared interesting points regarding how their identity as post-traditional students is validated in their respective program. Some main points that emerged from the responses to the focus group session questions were positive feelings of inclusion and noticed differences from the traditional students they interacted with in TUG programs they used to be a part of.

Feelings of Inclusion

In sharing their feelings about returning to school as post-traditional students, all

participants shared similar mixed emotions of excitement and doubt and uncertainty. The negative feelings have since faded because of the connection they feel through the shared identities of their peers in the program. Victoria mentioned, "When I saw other people there my age, I felt more comfortable." Frank added, "…these students are just like me. They hadn't been in school for a long time… but they're here like me."

Seeing themselves represented as the majority of the program helped increase feelings of inclusion which in turn lead to an increased sense of belonging and confidence in their abilities as a student. Victoria said, "I think it seems like everyone is in the same boat, and we are all here for the same goal so that makes it easier." Being in a program designed specifically for the post-traditional population helped increase positive feelings of inclusion and helped eliminate feelings of self-doubt.

Noticed Differences from Traditional Students

Although these are their current experiences in the ADP program, both Frank and Victoria previously had the opportunity to be in class settings with traditional aged students, Frank, through TUG, and Victoria, at her local community college. From this, they mentioned how that experience has given them an appreciation for the ADP program they are in now. When Frank started in TUG, he noticed learning differences between him and his younger peers. Frank stated, "while it came easy to younger students, I've been out of school for a while, so my thought processing was… different and that was challenging for me to cope with." He continued by mentioning that he now appreciates being in the ADP program because it allows him time for himself and his other responsibilities. "Having the opportunity to take less classes, especially in the evening, gave me the opportunity to focus and have more time for myself, for work and for other things that I could be taking care of during the day."

Victoria shared that during her experience in classes with traditional aged students, she felt not only a disconnect, but also a feeling that she had to censor herself as a student, saying, "if there were a lot of younger people… I felt like I had more licensed experience... it almost didn't seem appropriate for me to speak when they're new to schooling. These shared experiences highlight not only the benefit behind feeling included in their program, but also the way a student's success can be hindered because of the feelings that emerge from a lowered sense of belonging and inclusion.

Institutional Responses

Both groups of students discussed the positives and negatives of their programs' responses to their specific needs and their identities as post-traditional students. Because of this, this larger theme will be categorized into four subthemes: (1) positive institutional responses of TUG, (2) areas for growth in TUG, (3) positive institutional responses of ADP, and (4) areas for growth of ADP.

Positive Responses of TUG Program

When speaking to David and Vanessa about the ways in which they felt TUG excelled, they shared some positive examples in two areas: (1) the application/enrollment process and (2) the faculty response in regards to flexibility with their added responsibilities.

In respect to the application and enrollment experience, both David and Vanessa spoke

highly of how helpful and simple the process was. David mentioned, "The application process was easy. Then once I actually got on campus and did the transition and the welcome on board brief, the counselors were very helpful." Vanessa shared how her academic counselor took the time to understand what other obligations she had to ensure they found a schedule that worked for her. "The counselor asked how many classes I was looking at taking, because I have a daughter. She said maybe starting with three to see the load and how much I can handle. I thought that was really helpful,"

Within regard to faculty support, Vanessa was able to speak positively on how "understanding and flexible" her professors have been with her other obligations. Vanessa said, "Most of my professors have been understanding when things happen… I think that that's been a big help, having professors who acknowledge who's not a traditional student and being flexible." Relatedly, David shared an example of a private conversation he had with faculty about his identity as a post-traditional student, saying:

> I learned that when you talk to your professors and you tell them who you are and your background, they treat you differently… like an adult. Their expectations automatically get higher for you because obviously you're older and you're more mature, and they don't treat you like a child anymore.

I continued by asking David if it became exhausting having to do that each semester when he had a new faculty member, and he responded letting me know that for him it is fine, he does not mind it, but he does understand for others it might be challenging to do.

Areas for Growth of TUG Program

Within this point of the focus group sessions, the participants were asked to speak about some of the areas where they did not feel supported by their program. Four key themes emerged: (1) general negative experiences that hindered the students' success and sense of belonging, (2) lack of programming and events geared toward the post-traditional population, (3) lack of representation in marketing materials, and (4) overall suggestions from the participants on what they felt would be beneficial to have on campus to support the post-traditional student population.

This example sheds light on how the system was confusing and difficult to navigate, but also how it made Vanessa feel disconnected from the campus population. Another area mentioned was the lack of programming and events that promote inclusion with the post-traditional population.

For David, he mentioned he was not too concerned with out of classroom events or programs as his main goal is to graduate as quickly as possible. For Vanessa, however, she spoke to the fact that of the programming she has seen on campus, not much seems to be geared to the post-traditional population or considerate of time offerings and family inclusion. While she understands traditional students, the population these events are intended for, do not typically have children, she feels it would be nice to have the opportunity to attend with her daughter. Vanessa mentioned, "it would be cool to see this event is for parent students… so if I want to do stuff, I can make sure that I'm doing it with [my daughter]." For Vanessa it appeared that the inclusion of post-traditional students and their needs is an afterthought when creating

programming and events. Vanessa mentioned that the only club/program she has participated in is the commuter club. "They send weekly emails about, I don't know, just tips and stuff. That [club] hasn't really done much for me."

Another key point that was mentioned with the focus group session was the lack of representation they see of post-traditional students on campus. They both pointed out that with the population growing, it might be beneficial for the institution to market more to the post-traditional population by also including representation in marketing materials. Both David and Vanessa agreed that having more marketing and displayed representation of post-traditional students can not only help this population feel seen on campus, but it can also help prospective post-traditional students see that they can be successful at this institution because they are supported and acknowledged.

Both David and Vanessa shared suggestions for ways their program can better support them as post-traditional students based on their experiences. Based on the suggestions they provided, the underlying theme with each was that they both wanted a way to connect with others who shared similar experiences and to have a support system that understood their identity. David mentioned the benefits of having a support group for post-traditional students "where they can talk and find ways to help with the challenges of being an older student in a program made for younger students." Vanessa continued by describing that within the classroom she sometimes feels the professors are not accommodating of the students individually but rather classify them all as traditional students. This suggests that training faculty on the needs of this student population may be helpful in better supporting them. Lack of support from faculty adds to feelings of lost identity within her program and can hinder her success within the classroom.

Positive Responses of ADP Program

Evan, Frank, and Victoria shared the areas that they felt the ADP program excelled. Based on their responses, the participants felt that the program excelled in four key areas: (1) the application and enrollment process, (2) the program offerings, (3) faculty support, and (4) the advising model.

All three participants spoke to not only how easy the application and enrollment process was, but they all touched on how supportive the team was in helping them apply and begin in their program. Victoria stated, "I applied late, but the admission counselor helped me with the process… I got the acceptance the following week, and they signed me up for classes. It was really simple." Evan also spoke regarding the same admissions counselor and said, "She made it super easy for me to get in and she helped me get all the classes I needed. She helped me transition back into school and that was a big step for me."

In addition, the participants all shared that the reason for enrolling and staying in the program is the specific offerings the institution provides that are geared to their needs as post-traditional students. Both Victoria and Evan discussed how being in a program that offers night classes, allows the flexibility to maintain a full-time job to continue supporting themselves and their families. Victoria said, "The reason I chose the program was because I liked the scheduling of it, I don't have to struggle to find the time to fit classes into my work schedule." Evan added, "The flexibility allows me to keep up with my other responsibilities, and I don't know of many programs that focus on that."

The participants also mentioned that the program ensures for small class sizes which has helped build a strong sense of community and strong faculty relationships. Frank shared:

> As far as feeling included goes, yes, they do a lot of that, so much just so even the lady at the front desk in off-site center greets you with open arms, remembers you…not just see you as someone in the computer system, you are treated like real people. Because it's a smaller community you feel you're really seen.

Victoria added that of the professors she has had, they have all been very supportive and understanding of her needs outside the classroom. Victoria said, "Every professor has made it clear that you can reach out for support at any time, and have expressed that their syllabus is strict, but they would make exceptions if necessary because they understand we all have other obligations also." All these shared experiences are examples of how the set-up of the program and the aspects they offer are intentional in making post-traditional students feel included and supported within their academic pursuit.

The participants all spoke highly of the advising office and the support they offer to all their students. Frank referred to the advising office as the "one stop shop" and added that the office helps, "setting up classes, initiating specifics like paperwork and just basic things you need as a student to even exist on this campus. They do everything there." Aside from that Frank added, "they are knowledgeable in what we as post-traditional students specifically need, and if they don't have the answer, they know who to ask to make sure we get the answer." Evan added, "Everybody that I've met there in the advising staff are all caring and very helpful so that makes it amazing and then just the fact that they hold your hand through the process is appreciated." Not only have they felt the positive presence of the advisors in their individual meetings and encounters, but they mentioned that this continues with the follow-up they do for their students. Victoria added, "We receive weekly email updates from the advising team and that helps keep us up to date on things. Everybody just seems so available and more than willing to help." The experiences Frank, Victoria, and Evan shared really speak to the positive aspect that having a population-specific program has on the post-traditional student sense of belonging and support.

Areas for Growth of ADP Program

In addition to sharing the positive areas of the ADP program, Frank, Victoria, and Evan all spoke to the areas they feel could be improved upon to better support the post-traditional student needs. Based on the responses they shared, this section can be classified into two distinct areas: (1) feelings of separation from TUG and the main campus in general, and (2) suggestions for improvements.

Because he transferred from TUG over to ADP, Frank really spoke on the feelings of separation from the campus. Since his transition to ADP, he mentioned that is important for the program to "make students feel like they are a part of the campus and not just the program." Frank continues by talking about how since his transition this has become a big takeaway for him. He said, "There's a sense of separation from the campus. It's just a class in a way and not an experience... There is exclusion… you're not involved in the traditional school setting."

After hearing about the areas for growth they see for the program, I invited the

participants to share any suggestions they had for ways the program can better support their needs as a post-traditional student. Frank suggested:

> Maybe a welcome aboard package could be good… Basically, a starter pack that you can say, "Hey, here's a little schedule book and this is specifically what's going on with your program this quarter or into the next quarter."

Frank also suggested that the program can be advertised more since he did not know of the program until his TUG counselor mentioned it to him. Victoria added on by mentioning that taking classes at the off-site centers is difficult for a few reasons, the commute, and the lack of resources. Victoria said:

> I think it would be nice to not have to take some classes at the off sites, but instead have everything available on the main campus. I understand the diversity of the program and using the off sites to help with the commute of some students, but the drive can get difficult for me at times.

For Evan, his only suggestion was regarding the tutoring hours and availability. Evan said, "I'd like to see more tutoring options. Just because I've always struggled with math and… I could always use that extra help and encouragement to understand it."

In general, they have felt that the program has supported them in many ways and feel that there is not much more to suggest for changes. This speaks to how well the program has helped support the post-traditional students in their academic pursuits.

Discussion

Creating and implementing programs geared specifically for adult students can help minimize and remove areas of friction and create services that are both accommodating and post-traditional student focused. Based on the data collected from the focus group sessions, it became evident that there were more positive experiences from the students in the ADP program.

For the participants who were a part of ADP, they spoke highly of the fact that having a program catered specifically to their population made a big difference in their education. According to Rendón's validation theory (1994), outside of in-class validation, students will turn to other validating agents, such as counselors, staff members, and advisors. Rendón and Munoz (2011) identified validation as a driving force that promotes students' strengths and beliefs in their learning abilities, which leads to a stronger sense of self-esteem and cultivates their drive to succeed. Not only did participants express positive classroom experiences, but they also spoke to the benefits of having staff members who are trained to support post-traditional students. The experiences participants in the ADP program shared, highlight the positive impact that comes from a program geared specifically toward the post-traditional student and the validation that comes from having a strong support system.

Although the post-traditional population is increasing, many traditional institutional programs have not adapted to meet their specific needs. The participants of this study spoke to their experiences being in programs considered adult-ignoring and geared toward traditional

students and the consequential negative impact it had on their collegiate experiences. Based on the narrative constructed by the participants, there is a decrease in confidence because of the lack of validation and representation in their respective program. This, in turn, causes students to feel isolated from the campus community and lack a sense of belonging. Increasing academic validation both in and out of the classroom will serve as a catalyst for change in helping post-traditional students trust their innate capacity to learn and to acquire confidence in themselves as a student (Rendón, 1994). This increased sense of confidence may also positively impact persistence and success rates among this population of students.

Implications for Professional Practice

Within the professional practice there are small things programs can do to help eliminate some of the listed barriers. Kasworm (2003) added that it is important for offices to be open at alternative hours. Having alternative hours of operation allows access to services and support for post-traditional students who work full-time during normal hours of operation. One other suggestion is to create programming that is explicitly family friendly, so student parents can feel comfortable being involved and engaged outside of the classroom without the added barrier of having to ask/express a need for accommodation to in turn experience an increased sense of belonging. Another suggestion from participants included faculty and staff training on post-traditional students' characteristics and needs. Cross (1981) mentioned that post-traditional students must address multiple considerations to be successful, balanced students; these include childcare, commuting, finances, class schedules, part-time or full-time employment, orientation to the campus, and introduction to available support services. These suggestions from the literature align with the lived experiences and recommendations provided by the participants of this study. Validation from faculty and staff will create a newfound sense of self-confidence which will promote a stronger sense of integration into college life for this population (Rendón, 1994; Rendón & Munoz 2011).

In hearing from participants, they all suggested that some form of mentorship or support group would be beneficial for their population. This is reinforced by Edirisingha (2009), which posits that mentorships for post-traditional students can improve social capital, bridge the gap between institutional culture and student culture, and provide students with insider tips for maneuvering the system.

Implications for Future Research

The lack of research on this student population in general may be the biggest barrier for post-traditional students (Hagedorn, 2015; Kasworm, 2005, Rabourn et al., 2018). More studies about positive interventions, programs, and services developed to support post-traditional students are necessary. It is important to continue researching the ways educators can support this population academically while also fostering their identity as post-traditional students. Future research should focus on a validation and strengths-based approach on the ways to create supportive interventions and the ways in which faculty and staff can adapt to meet the post-traditional students' needs instead of placing the responsibility on the student to adapt to the program. It is also beneficial to have research on how to implement trainings for faculty and staff on the ways to include post-traditional students. My hope is that this study can be a

catalyst for change that will pilot studies with larger sample sizes to further address the need to support post-traditional students in higher education and break the traditional mold to be more inclusive of this growing population.

Conclusion

Post-traditional students are a growing population, and the traditional model is not enough to meet the needs of this population. Considering the national push to increase the number of students holding degrees, this topic is becoming more prevalent. However, when we take into account where funds and efforts are being allocated, it is evident that it creates a gap that leaves post-traditional students feeling under equipped and less supported. It is important to change and adapt to create a space where post-traditional students can feel included and validated which will allow for academic success. This population will continue to grow at a rapid rate, and enrolling this diverse population is not enough. There is no-one-size-fits-all for student success and support, so this same notion should be considered now that post-traditional students are increasing on college campuses. There is power behind breaking the mold that is the traditional method of operation and adapting programs and services to become equitable and inclusive in supporting post-traditional students.

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