

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

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“I didn’t know where I fit in the academic community.

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

- *Patrick, pseudonym (age 55, nontraditional, first-generation college graduate)*

First-Generation and Nontraditional College Students

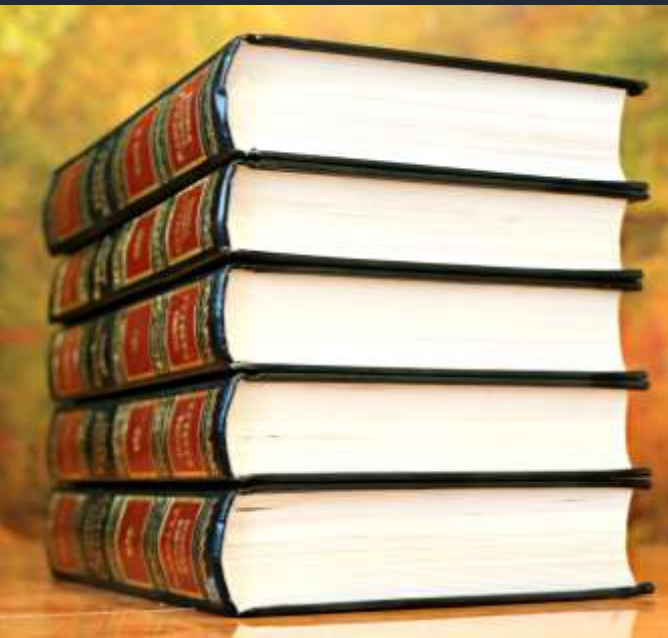
- First-generation college students (FGCS)
 - Parents have not obtained a 4-year college degree (Davis, 2010)
- Nontraditional students (adult learners)
 - 25 years or older (Bean & Metzner, 1985)
- Significant part of undergraduate population (NCES, 2017; CLASP, 2015)
 - Lower rates of academic retention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

Challenges in College

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



Present Research



- Family case study
 - 2 nontraditional, first-gen. college graduates
 - 1 first-generation college graduate
- Explored
 - Adjustment and transition to college
 - Help-seeking behaviors

Participants

- Sarah
(pseudonym)**
- **56-year-old
White female**
 - **Began
college at
age 48**
 - **Adult learner**

- Patrick
(pseudonym)**
- **55-year-old
White male**
 - **Began
college at
age 25**
 - **Adult learner**

- Mike
(pseudonym)**
- **49-year-old
White male**
 - **Began college
at age 18**
 - **Half sibling
(maternal)**

Qualitative Method & Analysis

- Analyze rich data and contextualize findings in ways that quantitative methods cannot (Clarke & Braun, 2006)
- Key themes
 - Importance of social reputation
 - Age influencing college experience
 - Importance of relational universality

THEME 1: Social Reputation & Impression Management

“I was... a football player... status was hugely important.”

Patrick, 55-year-old man

“So, I’m constantly keeping myself in check... always being mindful of doing the right thing.”

Sarah, 56-year-old woman

“I hated the idea that I would... have somebody thinking boy what a jerk, you know?”

Mike, 49-year-old man

THEME 2: Age & College Experience

“Hardest... oh probably just being 25. I thought at that time that was kind of old... a lot of kids who do come out directly from high school.”

Patrick, 55-year-old man

“The most challenging thing was just being a non-traditional student... finding where you fit in the classroom.”

Sarah, 56-year-old woman

“I didn’t need a lot of guidance... I joined a fraternity. I had a social circle. I navigated college just fine.”

Mike, 49-year-old man

THEME 3:

Social Support & Relational Universality

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

Patrick, 55-year-old man

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

Sarah, 56-year-old woman

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

Mike, 49-year-old man

Discussion & Conclusions

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

**THANK
YOU!**

Questions?

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