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## **In Search of the Community University Student**

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Around the first week of school, a young man stayed after class to speak to me, waiting until everyone left. Sam was in his late twenties, early thirties, a serious student in class with a permanent frown as he listened intently. He was worried about comments I had made concerning attendance and he explained that there might be times during the semester when he would have to be absent if his children were sick. He softly added that he was a single father of four small children. Several days later, I had the opportunity to ask him about his family and, as a proud father, he showed me pictures of his children.

Sam had not finished high school and had dropped out as a freshman. He held many odd jobs through the years and recalls working at a car wash. "Believe it or not, I actually made good money at the car wash, sure I had to work long hours, but still, it was good money."

The story changes as he shares how his wife left him with the children. Sometime later, he packed up his kids and anything else that fit in the car, and headed south. "I just wanted to get away from everything I knew. Basically, I just wanted to hide."

Tired of the big city, Sam found life in a small town refreshing. "The schools are just better down here, I already know my kids' teachers. You know, they even call me when my kids are absent from school. Up north where I came from, no one even noticed when I stopped going to school, no one."

However, life in a small town is not always easy. The jobs are scarce and do not pay well. Sam decided to get his GED diploma in hopes of finding a better job. One day a college recruiter spoke to the GED class about enrolling in the local community college and even helped the students with the applications and financial aid papers needed to enroll. "In my wildest dreams I never even imagined of going to college." Classmates debated back and forth whether to attend or not. "I'm poor not going to school," Sam told the others in the group, "I might as well be poor going to school."

Many other students just like Sam come knocking on our door. As an institution with an open door policy, both high school graduates and GED graduates alike have access to higher education. In the past, students graduated from high school and immediately enrolled in college full-time, depended on their parents financially, and worked part-time – if at all. These days, however, these characteristics are the exception rather than the rule with only 40% of four-year college students fitting this traditional mold (Choy, 2002). More students with diverse backgrounds, like Sam, are attending college than ever before and entering higher education "with a wide-range of student characteristics such as age, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and preparedness" (Higgs, 2002, p. 4). These nontraditional students encounter a range of social, economic, and cultural barriers to success in their postsecondary education.

The term "nontraditional" has been used to describe students who are typically enrolled in community colleges. One example of the more widely used definition is provided

by Bean and Metzner (1985) who define a nontraditional student as a student who is older than 24, does not live at a campus residence (commuter student), attends part-time, or reflects some combination of these factors. Another definition provided by the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) defines nontraditional through seven “risk factors” or characteristics that may hinder a student in completing their educational goal. These risk factors include part-time attendance, delayed enrollment, full-time work, dependents, single parenthood, lack of a high school diploma, and financial independence (Horn & Premo, 1995).

Postsecondary administrators and instructors need to have a clear picture of the shifting demographics of their student population in order to implement effective instructional programs designed to serve nontraditional students. Current educational practices and philosophies that infuse our schools have “failed miserably when it comes to educating students from culturally diverse and low-income backgrounds” (Howard, 2003, p. 201). Educators should be aware of important issues such as race, ethnicity, and culture in order to be able to “construct pedagogical practices that have relevance and meaning to students’ social and cultural realities” (Howard, 2003, p. 195).

In south Texas, a unique partnership between an open admissions community college and an upper-level university resulted in a “community university” with a vision of becoming a research institution, while still preserving the mission of a community college. The new institution now has a complicated task of implementing programs typically designed for undergraduates and graduates of four-year colleges while still meeting the needs of the nontraditional student body of a community college.

Because of the rapid growth of the diverse student population, along with the difficulties encountered in the transformation from a community college to a university, there arose a need for this study to answer the question: what are the characteristics of the students enrolled in this unique institution? Therefore, the purpose of this study is to narratively account for the students enrolled in the mathematics program of the community university.

### **Procedure for the Study**

This project focused primarily on mathematics students enrolled in a Texas community university that maintains an open door admissions policy. The first part of the study consists of a questionnaire that was administered to students enrolled in college-level mathematics courses. The second part included a narrative mode of inquiry that collected information through a written narrative assignment.

A 33-item questionnaire was developed to collect background information about the students. Items on the questionnaire were based on topics related to the characteristics of nontraditional students derived from a review of related literature. Prior to its use during fall 2004, the questionnaire was piloted and later revised. The form was then distributed to a large majority of students enrolled in the mathematics program. Care was taken to distribute the forms to an equal number of classes based on time and subject of each class. A total of 922 forms were collected or 52% of the total enrollment.

The second part of the study involved a written narrative assignment designed to capture personal and human experiences behind the survey-elicited characteristics of the students (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The assignment consisted of a one-page essay using a list of eight open-ended questions that was designed to prompt students for information about their educational background and their decision to enroll in college. During the spring 2005 semester, approximately 60 essays collected. Comments from twenty-one students were selected and interwoven throughout this text. Pseudonyms are used in place of their real names.

### **The Founding of a Community University**

In 1926, a Junior College was created that offered open access to its vocational and technical programs that were designed to meet the needs of students completing a one- or two-year certificate program. The community college also offered freshman and sophomore level courses for students. Unfortunately, local students who wished to earn Baccalaureate degrees were forced to transfer to other colleges in order to finish.

In 1973, in order to help students in the local community, a nearby university began to offer upper-level courses on its campus. By 1991, the two institutions merged forming a unique partnership between the open admissions community college and the upper-level university that resulted in "America's First Community University" (Report of the Washington Advisory Group, 2004, p. 9).

With the implementation of the partnership, the institution was renamed, bearing the name of the prestigious university and thus creating a single operating entity, a single admissions process, and a single faculty. Students enroll in the community college and seamlessly transfer to upper level university courses.

In recent years, the growth has been phenomenal, evident in the construction of the beautiful new buildings designed with meticulous care to blend with the historical buildings, yet styled with an added Spanish flair. We walk along the *paseo* that leads us from one end of the campus to the other, eat lunch at the *comedor*, or dining room, and have meetings at the *gran salon*, all situated amidst the flowing vines and trees. The institution even comes complete with stories of soldiers from the Mexican-American War who haunt our campus. Some Friday evenings groups of ghost hunters gather around the old morgue and other historic buildings that were part of the old army fort, which is a component of the original campus.

The community university now serves over 12,000 students with enrollment destined to leap spectacularly each year. Students still have open access to a wide range of courses including continuing education courses, technical and vocational courses, one-year certificate courses, Associate and Baccalaureate degrees, graduate programs, and with ambitious plans to add numerous degrees and programs each year.

### **Characteristics of the Students Enrolled in the Community University**

Students who enroll in the community university are as unique as the partnership that formed the institution. Results of the study revealed that the participants were predominantly Spanish speaking Hispanic students, the majority which was female with

an average age of about 26. Students were recent high school graduates, single, had no children, and employed while attending school full-time.

While the results of the study revealed that a large number of students attending this institution were primarily recent high school graduates a large number graduates in our district, however, still choose to enroll in distant universities. The students that do choose to enroll in the local community university do so for very specific reasons. Some attend this college due to strong family ties and because it is “close to home.” Others are unable to attend distant colleges because of economic hardships as many students help shoulder the financial responsibility of their family. Several are single parents and many others are planning to marry soon. Only a small percentage of the students indicated they planned to transfer to another institution.

The following are some of the subgroups of students that also emerged through the data collection; however, while presented separately, they are not intended to represent distinct groups of students.

### *Adult students*

Interestingly, a large number of students postpone entering college. Of the freshman mathematics students surveyed, only one out of three indicated they had enrolled in college within one year from graduating from high school. Seventeen percent indicated over five years had passed since receiving their secondary diploma with 36% waiting over eight years.

When investigating the reasons as to why students delay returning to school, many reasons emerged through the interviews. Some students choose to take some time off in order to work and contribute to the family income. Mary indicated she worked at a local grocery store for five years before returning to school. “Working at [the grocery store] was good since it did pay my bills, but I needed to feel good about me,” and so she enrolled in college. Monica stated she worked to help her family with “financial obligations” and was not able to enroll until nine years later.

A few women chose not to enter college after high school in order to start their family and be a “stay at home mom.” Gloria, who did not want her small children in daycare, waited eight years, until “a good friend reminded me it was never too late to go back to school.”

Some Hispanic women, especially single mothers, felt the traditional pressure that she was not supposed to go to college in order to care for her family. Nelly explains that when she married, her husband provided for her and the children:

*I had to stay home all these years to raise our children and take care of the house. I wanted more, but I agreed to stay home. Now that my children are grown, I finally have the opportunity to fulfill my dreams.*

The most surprising reason given for not entering college after high school came from a few students who indicated that they took time off after high school because they needed a “rest” and were unsure of what to do. Other students indicated they took some time off from school because they were unsure about their educational plans. Similarly, Jimmy enrolled in college and soon dropped out. He was surprised that college “was a lot harder than high school.”

Students who have been away from the academic setting for an extended period are a subgroup worth studying further. Academic support services should be provided to students whose study skills might be rusty or nonexistent. The reasons they return to college are many. Some students are newly separated or divorced. Many want a better job and career change and they want it now. All want a better life for themselves and for their families. They return to school willing to work hard at their education with the same dedication they had devoted to their job (Hardin, 1998).

### *Hispanic students*

While the term nontraditional refers to many ethnic groups, the focus of this inquiry is on Hispanics, which is the largest minority group attending the institution involved in the study. Participants were primarily Hispanic students of Mexican descent, with only 6% non-Hispanic and a small group of Asian students making up 1% of the student sample. According to the last U.S. Census Bureau (2000), Hispanics represent 12.5% of the total U.S. population, with the number rapidly increasing to a point where they will become the largest minority group. Yet Hispanic students have higher high school dropout rates and lower high school completion rates than White or Black students. While Hispanic enrollments in post secondary institutions increased between 1980 and 2000, a smaller proportion of Hispanics completed college compared to Whites and Blacks (Llagas, 2003).

The community university prides itself in its efforts of preserving the Hispanic culture as evident in the décor of the buildings and in its school functions. Spanish flows freely, both inside and outside the classroom and it is not uncommon for classroom discussions to be held in both English and in Spanish. Fry (2003) notes that English language ability is an important indicator of the likelihood of dropping out of high school. Only 32% of the students indicated they speak only English, with the rest indicating they spoke Spanish. Also, over half of the students in the study indicated Spanish was the first language they learned to speak at home.

A few students live in México and cross the border every day to study. Approximately three out of ten students indicated that at one time, they lived, or currently live, in México. One family sacrificed for the education of their children. Susana, whose family lives in the interior of México, was sent to live here with relatives at the age of 13 in order to study:

*I moved from house to house. One month I would stay with one relative and then later with another. It was very lonely and I missed my family. Right after I graduated from high school at the age of 17, I started working full time so my sister who was in México could come and join me. It was my turn to help her.*

### *Developmental students*

Another common characteristic of nontraditional students is their enrollment in developmental courses. Developmental Education, which is sometimes called compensatory education or remedial education, includes courses that are designed to prepare students to enter college level courses. Some of the students enrolled in developmental education are recent high school graduates who for various reasons are skill-deficient. Developmental education students, however, form a diverse group including increasing numbers of single

parents and children of single-parent families, high school dropouts seeking to complete their education, workers requiring technical retraining, new immigrants, and other groups of skill deficient students (Roueche, Roueche, & Ely, 2001).

Results of the study revealed that a large number of students enrolled in the freshman-level mathematics course had previously been enrolled in a least one developmental mathematics course. Students that do not meet the minimum passing score are placed in one of three developmental mathematics courses. If a student scores at or above the minimum passing score, the student enrolls in a freshman-level mathematics course. In the Math for Liberal Arts course, a course designed for non-math majors, 51% of the students had previously enrolled in at least one developmental mathematics course. In the College Algebra course, a course designed for math and science related majors, only 32% had previously enrolled in at least one developmental mathematics course.

While many students may not be able to succeed in college without the help of developmental courses, the number of developmental courses students take may hinder their academic progress. If a student needs to enroll in all three developmental areas, such as mathematics, reading and writing, this student adds up to 27 credit hours to his/her degree plan. Furthermore, these courses usually must be completed prior to taking upper level courses. Some students become frustrated taking developmental courses that "don't count." As Mary comments:

*I attended college right after graduating from high school, but for two years made little progress. I had to take the math remedial courses and that really was discouraging. I should have tried harder in high school, and then maybe I wouldn't have had to take the remedial classes so many times.*

### *Student employment*

Family and work responsibilities place heavy demands on a student's time that cannot be ignored. Many students work to support their families, others work to offset the cost of their education. Six out of ten students surveyed indicated they worked either part- or full-time. An incredible nine percent indicated they worked over 40 hours per week. Interestingly, the percentage of students working increased in the upper level courses. With such a large number of students working, one has to question their priorities. As one student explains:

*I want to be a bilingual teacher, but sometimes it is very hard for me to be at school because I work and have a lot of responsibilities. I do not understand why some teachers believe that school is more important than work; I believe that both things are important. I need to work because I have to pay my car, my house, my light bill, my water, my phone, food, and more. I am married and if my husband or I stop working, we would lose everything.*

### *Part-time attendance*

Students choose to attend part-time for a variety of reasons. Some students take one or two classes for personal enrichment, but do not necessarily seek a degree. Other students may wish to get a degree, but cannot afford to give up their jobs to do so.

Some of these students have jobs that do not permit full-time attendance while others are homemakers whose responsibilities in their homes and families also limit their involvement in the postsecondary institution (McCormick, Geis, & Vergun, 1995).

Josie waited several years before returning to school, and when she returned, she attended part-time because of her children and work. She recounts the unique challenge of trying to juggle work, school, and family responsibilities:

*I only attend college two days of the week, the other three I work as a substitute teacher. After work, I spend what little time I have left with my children. I have two boys. My oldest is four years old and my youngest is one, going on the terrible twos. I really don't know how I do it to study. I'll be honest with you; sometimes I cannot even study because I don't have a babysitter. I just try my best.*

Students who attend part-time progress slowly toward a degree and often become frustrated, as Jaime said:

*I attend school part-time and it seems like I am never going to finish. One semester, I tried to take several courses to speed things up, but it was too hard to work all day and then go to school each night. Honestly, I don't know how much longer I can hang in there.*

Similar to students who work full-time, students who attend part-time have limited time to study and have limited choice of the number of classes they can take or when they can take them, and have a reduction of library access. Also, students who attend less than part-time may not be eligible for financial aid. In the community university, 26% of the mathematics students surveyed indicated they attended part-time with slightly more than half of these students being female.

### *Undergraduates with dependents*

There are many undergraduates enrolled in our institution with dependents other than a spouse. In addition to children, dependents may include parents, siblings, and other members of the family for whom the student is financially responsible. Students with dependents must be able to manage college attendance with family responsibilities. In fact, research indicates that family pressures and obligations were listed among the top five major reasons for withdrawal by older and part-time students (Bean & Metzner, 1985). Of the mathematics students surveyed, 23% indicated they had dependent children. Unfortunately, the questionnaire did not specifically ask if the children were living with the student or not. Nevertheless, the pressure of family responsibility is still a concern. One student explained it well:

*Working, taking care of a family, and going to school full-time is demanding. Yet, the older you get, the more you realize how important school is, because you have a family and you are making a sacrifice so great. Furthermore, it is time away from your children – that is the hardest part. But in the end, it will be worth all the tears you've cried, to finally become the person you have always dreamed of being.*

Some students also have the responsibility of caring for their parents:

*Right after graduation, I enrolled at the University full-time. In my fourth semester, I became pregnant with my son. During my pregnancy, my father was diagnosed*

*with cancer. He took leave from his job to undergo chemotherapy. I withdrew from all my classes and quit my job. We both stayed home and went to doctor appointments together.*

### *Single parents*

Of the mathematics students surveyed, 8% indicated they were single parents with dependent children. Janie, a single mother, recounts trying to cope with school and family responsibilities:

*I want to do the best I can so I can be a role model for my son. He is my motivation to keep going. At times, I just don't feel like getting up and coming to class, yet, when I look at him and I know that I have to try hard and not give up. It is hard to study when my son is crawling on me and yelling for my attention.*

Sarah, also a single mother, decided education was the path to change:

*When I was in high school I ended up having a baby my junior year. The event that influenced me to attend the university was one day I was watching this show about teen dropouts and how many of the young girls were not succeeding in life. That scared me. I did not want to become one of those statistics. So now I am a single mother of a four year old and taking fifteen to eighteen hours a semester to quickly achieve my goal in order to succeed in life for my daughter.*

### *First-generation students*

When asked about their educational background, one out of three students indicated they were the first in their family to attend college. Furthermore, roughly eight out of ten students indicated their parents or legal guardians did not have a college degree. Choy (2001) notes that postsecondary students whose parents did not attend college “are at a distinct disadvantage [and] remain at a disadvantage with respect to staying enrolled and attaining a degree” (p. xviii).

Students who are the first in their family to attend college face unique challenges and may lack support from parents and friends who have no college experience. Instructors need to step in and offer guidance and encouragement to first-generation students. Kerka (1998) states that first-generation college students often experience a culture clash in academic environments that can be overcome through mentoring. It is important to obtain a better understanding of how to increase first-generation students' opportunities in preparing for college and thus help improve their chances of benefiting from a college education (Horn & Nunez, 2000).

Joe is a first-generation student who told me of his determination to succeed because of this very same reason. He told me:

*I grew up very poor. I remember as a young boy I worked every day after school. I was always trying to finish my homework quick enough to be able to have time to work and earn lunch money because my mother didn't have money [to give] all four children every day. I have had a hard life and confronted many obstacles. I know the effects of not having an education – like my mother because she didn't finish school. Even though I do not like school in any way, I still attend; I see my*

*goal across the road and all I have to do is cross it so that I won't repeat the cycle of my family. All I need is dedication.*

*Students who did not graduate from high school*

Students who enter postsecondary education without having earned a high school diploma may have trouble when they decide to enroll in postsecondary education. For whatever reason young students decide to leave high school, many students do choose to return and earn a high school equivalency certificate such as the General Educational Development (GED) diploma. While the majority of the students enrolled in college with a high school diploma, 13% of the developmental students entered with GED credentials compared to only 5% of non-developmental students. It is important for instructors to remember that the GED diploma measures their ability to complete the most basic of high school level work and does not necessarily measure their ability to be successful in college (Hardin, 1998).

### **Discussion and summary**

This report brought to light several subgroups of the student population enrolled in our community university. Some of these groups include adult students, Hispanic students with limited English skills, developmental students, working students, and first-generation students. Each one of these subgroups is an equally important component of the whole student population in this community university. The profile of this community college student body, however, is uniquely different when compared to other community colleges and to other institutions of higher learning. This is true of each institution and even departments within each institution. Each institution must then begin to define the composition of its own student body.

While this type of investigative research may be conducted campus wide by an institution, an individual instructor or program director may also choose to conduct this type of research in order to build a profile of their student body. The first step is to decide which type of data is necessary to gather such as age, sex, and ethnic origin. Instructors may want to know other information relating, for example, to study habits such as the number of hours students are attending tutorial. Student background information and their areas of interest may help classroom teachers design projects, group discussions, and writing assignments that students will find appealing.

By analyzing their students' educational background, instructors can then plan a variety of new approaches to learning, skills development, and commitment to the learning process. Gander and Shea (1998) argue that instructors should define a system of instruction that "systematically addresses the diversity of students' learning profiles and needs [which must be] flexible, individualized, comprehensive, and systematic, rather than pitched toward a mythical middle ground" (p. 65).

The information gained from the data collection process will also help school administrators and program directors in designing and refining programs, and then as a tool for evaluation. Staff development training can be designed to help instructors and college staff with current information and strategies on such issues as student retention. Instructors also need to know how to help students who may have weak study skills, and

are distracted with family and work obligations, without lowering academic standards.

The most important advantage to this type of research is the increased awareness and sensitivity to the needs of our students. The insights discovered as we unearth the challenges our students face, both inspire and challenge us. Our hearts are revitalized and recharged as we reach out and help our students to succeed. Vockell and Asher (1995) state that “the participation of teachers in qualitative research, collaboratively or individually, holds the promise of contributing markedly to the profession of teaching, to education, and to one’s personal growth and insight” (p. 198).

Prior to this study, I never realized the long hours many students work and the financial responsibilities they feel. With so many hours spent working, students do not have time to study. I must make sure that class time is productive and meaningful.

Unaware of the family obligations of many of the students, I was surprised to find out how many young students are married and have children. It just never occurred to me. I still carried the image of the carefree “traditional” high school graduate that was single and still living at home with no major responsibility other than school. To my surprise, I could not find these students enrolled in my classes. I am extremely impressed with students who must juggle work, family, and school responsibilities.

In conclusion, what began as simple data collection for a retention study soon became a wonderful journey of discovery. I found the only common characteristic between my students is that they each bring richness to the community university with their own exceptional stories and their own unique journey to success. It is our job, no, it must be our passion, to help each student embark on such a wonderful journey, and perhaps even find ourselves in the process.

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