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Reimers-Hild, Connie I., "Experiences, Insights and Advice: Perspectives of a Nontraditional Graduate Student" (2011). *Kimmel Education and Research Center - Faculty & Staff Publications*. 12.
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Experiences, Insights and Advice: Perspectives of a Nontraditional Graduate Student

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Abstract

I recently graduated with my Ph.D., and I have had a variety of experiences during my college career. For example, I have been both a traditional student and a nontraditional learner. I have also studied at a distance. A variety of educational and professional experiences have enabled me develop some powerful insights on what it takes to be a successful nontraditional learner. One of the most important lessons I have learned is that it is important to develop learners' human and social capital in order to help them increase their chances of success. First, this paper will present my experiences as a learner and a distance education professional. Second, this paper will discuss the insights I have developed. Finally, this paper will provide students, instructors and administrators with practical advice designed to improve the experiences of this growing group of students.

Background

My name is Connie Reimers-Hild, and I recently graduated with my Ph.D. I have been both a traditional and nontraditional learner during my undergraduate and graduate student lives, and these experiences have taught me a lot about what it takes to be successful as a learner. Before I continue on, I would like to define two key terms:

Traditional learner:

A student who enrolls in college on a full-time basis at the expected/normal age of enrollment. For example, traditional undergraduate students are full-time learners who typically enroll in college on a continuous basis directly after completing high school. Many traditional graduate students attend school on a full-time basis while on an assistantship or fellowship. Traditional learners may or may not hold a part-time job. However, their main focus in life is typically their full-time academic career.

Nontraditional learner:

Nontraditional learners are defined very broadly because they include virtually all students other than those who fit in the traditional learner category. Nontraditional learners typically enroll in college courses or programs at older than expected/normal ages. They enroll on either a part-time or full-time basis. Nontraditional learners' enrollments can be continuous, non-continuous or change throughout the course of their academic careers. Further, nontraditional learners might

Document originally published by Connie Reimers-Hild, Ph.D. (creimers2@unl.edu) in the Conference Proceedings of the 2006 Distance Learning Administration Conference in Jekyll Island, GA

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be employed on a full- or part-time basis or they may not be employed at all. A 30-year old male who stays at home with his two children and enrolls in a 3 credit hour undergraduate course each semester is considered a nontraditional learner. A 50-year old female who works full-time as an executive in a large company and enrolls in 6 credit hours of graduate credit each semester is also considered a nontraditional learner. However, in each example, the main focus of the nontraditional learner is not necessarily their academic career.

There are many differences between traditional and nontraditional learners; however, there are also a number of similarities. Both traditional and nontraditional learners have to juggle many different responsibilities. Further, learners must strive to find a balance between their many different roles and responsibilities, which may include school, work, family and community.

Experiences

My nontraditional student status began during my undergraduate program. I was an older undergraduate who had to work as much as possible to pay my way through college. My undergraduate advisor was aware of my situation, so he encouraged me to leave my low paying job as a cashier to find a job on campus that would help me gain both professional experience and important contacts. His suggestion turned out to be a great piece of advice. I landed a part-time summer job in a small department on campus. The work experience itself was valuable; however, it was the mentoring and professional development opportunities that really helped me achieve success.

I was initially hired to do field work for a professor, who I will refer to as Dr. Edwards, during the summer. I did not know it at the time, but the seasonal job with Dr. Edwards would eventually lead me to graduate school and a career in academia.

One Saturday morning I was filing papers in Dr. Edwards' office, and he suggested that I consider going to graduate school. I assured him that I had absolutely no intention of continuing my education. My goal was to graduate and get a job so I could start making money. Then, he told me that I could get paid to go to graduate school! Getting paid for continuing my education was a totally new concept to me, so I began to listen to what he had to say about the benefits of attending graduate school. After a great deal of discussion, I accepted a full-time assistantship with Dr. Edwards. Further, he served as my Major Advisor. I went from a nontraditional undergraduate to a graduate student who pursued and completed a Master's of Science degree on a full-time basis. I was now a traditional learner.

During my M.S. program, Dr. Edwards continued to mentor and advise me. He also helped develop my real world skills by designating me as the research leader for his field protocols. I led his research team. My responsibilities included hiring and training student workers, organizing and implementing research protocols and supervising both masters and doctoral level graduate research assistants. Dr. Edwards further developed my credentials by taking me to professional meetings and introducing me to potential employers.

I invested in my human capital (knowledge, skills and abilities) largely through formal education and training. However, in order to be truly successful, I also had to develop relationships and networks (social capital) with individuals who could help me achieve success. Dr. Edwards was instrumental in helping me invest in both my human and social capital while in graduate school.

Dr. Edwards constantly gave me, and all of his other students, advice on issues that people do not typically learn in the classroom. Dr. Edwards told us what to wear, what to say, what not to say and how to act, and he encouraged his students to be extremely professional at all times. One key piece of advice he shared with all of his students was, “you are always being interviewed.” It became very apparent to me that this type of information was not shared with many other graduate students. Some students would attend professional meetings in t-shirts and shorts while Dr. Edwards’ students networked with high-level individuals dressed as professionals.

My fellow graduate students used to tell me how lucky I was to have an advisor who introduced me to individuals with connections in the job market. I was extremely fortunate in this regard. Dr. Edwards had a reputation of consistently placing his graduate students in high-level positions within both academia and the private sector, and he earned this reputation by making sure his students were connecting with the right people while they were in graduate school.

Of course, graduate school was not the only thing in my life (although at times it seemed as if it was). I also had a very close family, friends and other obligations. I even managed to marry my husband during this phase of my life.

After I graduated with my master’s degree, I accepted the position as Distance Education Coordinator at the same university from which I had just graduated. I also decided to broaden my expertise and to follow my passion by pursuing a Ph.D. in Human Sciences with a specialization in Leadership Studies.

I began my part-time doctoral program by enrolling in two distance courses with an instructor, Dr. Singer, who I had taken a couple of classes with in the past. Dr. Singer was a fabulous teacher, and I had developed a positive relationship with him during both my bachelors and masters programs. I asked him if he would be willing to advise me during my doctoral program, and he agreed. Dr. Singer helped me form a committee, develop a program of studies and get through my doctoral program.

During my doctoral program, I was teaching and advising distance learners as well as directing the activities of a growing distance programs. My work with students quickly led to a faculty position with the title of Lecturer and Distance Education Coordinator. This was a very peculiar position. I was helping students while being a student myself. This dual role of being both a nontraditional student and a teacher/advisor, when combined with my experiences of being a nontraditional undergraduate and a traditional graduate student, allowed me to develop some very important insights.

Insights

As a nontraditional learner, I discovered the need for self-confidence, structure and connectedness. The luxury of totally immersing myself into my graduate program was gone. I had to learn to structure my graduate work around all of the other aspects of my life, including work and family. I also felt myself becoming a more demanding student. I expected quality, flexibility and affordability all at the same time.

One of my first adjustments was learning to develop my self-confidence. I had to learn how to juggle a doctoral program and all of the other aspects of my life. I also had to develop self-confidence in the theory and subject matter, and I no longer shared an office with other graduate students who could help boost my confidence during times of doubt. I did not have access to senior students who could share information with me about important things like research proposals, comprehensive exams or how to develop myself as a cutting-edge leadership professional. I really missed having fellow students with whom I could spend time developing both my confidence and my ability to be a successful professional.

The courses that best suited my needs connected theory with assignments that I could apply to my job. Some courses did a great job of connecting theory with real world experience; however, others did not. I really wanted instructors to be flexible yet rigorous and structured. For the most part, I was extremely fortunate to have instructors who built both flexibility and adult learning theory into their courses.

I was also very fortunate to have a wonderful advisor and an outstanding committee. Every single faculty member on my committee was both supportive and helpful. They all helped me grow as a learner and as a professional. However, I longed for administrators to structure the university's culture so that nontraditional students were recognized like their traditional counterparts. For example, I wanted to have the ability to be recognized for my work through awards, grants and fellowships.

Compared to my full-time assistantship, a nontraditional doctoral program fit well into my personal and professional aspirations; however, the camaraderie with fellow graduate students and professional development opportunities were not as apparent. Immersion in the subject matter was also difficult. Further, I struggled to learn more about the profession and the best ways in which to develop my professional credentials. I did not have the same professional development opportunities as a part-time student that I had when I studied under Dr. Edwards.

I noticed many of these same trends in the distance learners I worked with in my full-time position as Lecturer and Distance Education Coordinator. Prospective students would call me and ask for advice and assistance on topics like the application process, letters of recommendation, programs of study and what to do with their degree after graduating. Many of the questions that focused on age and technology were inherently designed to help build their self-confidence.

Advice

My personal educational experiences, when combined with the knowledge I gained while working with distance learners, have helped me develop some powerful insights. These insights have enabled me to develop advice for students, instructors and advisors as well as administrators:

Students

Self-confidence

I know that there are times when every learner thinks they just cannot do it anymore. I think this is especially true for individuals returning to school on a part-time basis or for learners who have not enrolled in school for a prolonged period of time. Self-confidence is at the very root of success. Learners really do have to believe it to achieve it when returning to school.

Time Management

This is a very serious issue. Students, especially nontraditional learners, must develop a time management strategy that works for them. I personally believe that every time management strategy should have a “no” component. This means that learners must find a way to say “no” to people, issues and activities that are not contributing to either the academic, personal or professional success. I realize this is easy to say and difficult to do; however, I firmly believe that learners must place their educational goals as a top priority in order to achieve them.

Ask for Help

Learners must talk to their instructors, advisors and fellow students. They must keep the lines of communication open and flowing and let other people know when they are struggling with something. I have always been pleasantly surprised by the willingness of others to help me when I ask for their assistance.

Support

My family, especially my husband, provided a great deal of personal support throughout my entire doctoral program. Support from friends and relatives is critical. Further, I would encourage every nontraditional learner to develop a support group consisting of fellow students. I happened to be lucky enough to be one of the original Dissertation Divas. The Divas began as five nontraditional female graduate students who were all either entering or in the dissertation stage of their doctoral programs. The Divas met on a regular basis. At the meetings, each Diva had to share her progress with the other Divas.

We also supported one another by answering questions, reviewing questionnaires and protocols and helping each other jump through the last “hoops” towards degree completion. We even helped support one another through the dissertation defense process. Perhaps the best thing about being a Diva is that someone was always there to

support and encourage you, and you knew that a fellow Diva could really relate to what you were experiencing. The Divas were the secret to my success. Our support group was very successful, and it continues to evolve. Our original group added a new Diva, and one of our new goals is to help each other grow as professionals. I developed an important personal and professional network through the Divas. I now encourage all students to develop their own support groups. Support groups, if structured correctly, are incredibly helpful, supportive and fun!

Be Entrepreneurial

An Entrepreneurial Learner can be defined as, “An innovative person who pursues educational opportunities irrespective of existing resources, such as time, money, personal support and/or technology” (Reimers-Hild, King, Foster, Fritz, Waller, & Wheeler, 2005). Entrepreneurial learners take control of their destiny. They possess a high need for achievement and take risks in order to achieve their goals. Entrepreneurial “learnership” is important for all students because it is ultimately up to the individual learner to achieve success.

Instructors and Advisors

Quality, Flexibility, Affordability, etc.

As I mentioned earlier, I became a more demanding student in my nontraditional graduate program. I expected quality, flexibility and affordability all at the same time. This can be very difficult to do as an instructor; however, it is critical. I expected quality. I wanted the material to directly relate to what I was doing as a professional. Flexibility was another critical factor. If I traveled for work, I had to be able to miss class without a penalty and without missing any information. I really enjoyed courses (both face-to-face and distance) that made it possible for me to balance my career with graduate school. Finally, affordability was an important element. Students cannot participate if they cannot afford to enroll. I realize that affordability and cost are issues that administrators typically address. However, it is also important for instructors and advisors to realize that affordability is an extremely important issue.

There was another interesting development in my list of expectations. I expected respect. I always felt like I had something of substance to add, and I wanted to be heard. I was a professional, and I needed to be viewed as one in my courses and throughout my graduate program. I could no longer accept being treated like a traditional graduate student who was there only to work and learn. I now felt like I had a substantial contribution to make, and I wanted to make it!

Professional and Personal Development

I encountered a somewhat difficult situation as a full-time professional enrolled in my doctoral program on a part-time basis. I wanted to develop my credentials in the areas of distance education and leadership while maintaining my full-time faculty position in another area. I also helped a number of distance learners with their questions regarding professional and personal development. Students wanted to know how to develop their credentials, which professional organizations to join, what classes to take, where and how to look for jobs and how to enhance their credentials. They also wanted information about publishing and presenting their research projects. The majority of nontraditional learners enroll in courses and programs to strengthen their credentials, and most of the students I worked with wanted to either move up in their current organizations or move into higher level positions.

A number of my colleagues thought professional and personal development was not an issue for our nontraditional distance learners. I cannot tell you how many times I heard that our distance learners were already in their professions and therefore did really need or want professional development information or opportunities.

I am dispelling this myth. Nontraditional students want to move forward in their careers. They may already be the Vice President of Product Development for an organization; however, they still want to achieve an increased level of personal and/or professional success. Most people would not enroll in courses and programs if they were not interested in some type of professional or personal development. Instructors, advisors and even administrators should keep this piece of information in mind when working with all learners. I will even go one step further and suggest that organizations will ultimately increase their chances of future success if they take the time to find out why each of their learners enrolls at their institutions. Instructors and institutions should find ways to enhance the professional development opportunities for learners. This includes creating and providing opportunities for learners to invest in both their human and social capital.

Administrators

Support

Dedicate resources to nontraditional and distance programs. This includes research and development efforts. Support also includes training and support for staff, faculty and students. Resources should be dedicated to supporting nontraditional learners. One example of this type of support is the web-based advising center for distance learners in the College of Agricultural Science and Natural Resources. The advising center enabled students to have 24/7 access to the information they need in order to be successful in their graduate programs (<http://casnrde.unl.edu/index.shtml>). I worked with a number of my colleagues to develop the learner-centered advising center.

The advising center was a project that allowed us to expand our philosophy of providing support and connectivity to distance learners. This type of advising center could be developed to include support for all students, including on-campus, distance, traditional and nontraditional learners.

I do have to caution administrators against separating nontraditional and distance programs from other areas of their institutions. I believe that nontraditional and distance programs should be part of the main university system so they can be more effective and efficient. Further, I think an inclusive, streamlined process helps nontraditional and distance learners feel more of a sense of belongingness to both the institution and its entire system.

Recognition and Celebration

Nontraditional and distance learners should be recognized and celebrated in the same manner as traditional and on-campus students. For example, part-time graduate students should be eligible for fellowship, scholarships and awards. Recognition helps motivate learners while building their credentials and credibility in their chosen areas of expertise. Both nontraditional and traditional learners are working towards achieving their goals, and institutions of higher education should do more to help them.

Ask for Help

Asking for help is especially important if an administrator has not taught, advised or participated in either nontraditional or distance education. Nontraditional and distance learners are not the same as traditional students at any age or stage of their educational careers. Administrators must ask nontraditional and distance learners as well as instructors and advisors with experience in these areas for help when creating and establishing policies and procedures.

Conclusions

I was walking to the car with my Mom after I graduated with my Ph.D. My Mom had tears in her eyes as she told me how proud she was of my accomplishment. Then, she talked about Dr. Edwards and how instrumental he was in making it all happen. She told me that her and my Dad both realized I would not be where I was today without Dr. Edwards' continual support and guidance. My Mom was right.

Dr. Edwards was one of the individuals who helped me move from an hourly worker to a person with a blossoming career, and he did it by helping me invest in both my human and social capital. Dr. Edwards, Dr. Singer, my family, my husband, the Dissertation Divas and a number of other individuals helped me get to where I am today. It literally took a village to help me achieve my personal and professional goals.

Learners must build personal and professional networks to help them achieve their goals. Further, instructors, advisors and administrators must put the tools and policies in place that enable students to develop these networks while also helping them build their professional credentials.

We should all adopt Dr. Edwards' educational philosophies and encourage individuals to use their skills, abilities and networks to help others achieve their goals and dreams.

Ultimately, I am the one who had to be an entrepreneurial learner to get it all done. However, I cannot stress enough the importance of networking and creating support systems. Believe me, there is nothing more motivating than hearing, "maybe it is time to realize the magnitude of what you have accomplished" when you feel like you just cannot make it across that finish line.

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