

Why “My Girls” Didn’t Succeed

Most of the published research on non-traditional college students supports common-sense knowledge: adults have more difficulty persisting to completion because of financial, familial, social, and workplace responsibilities. In addition, adults usually attend college part-time and have less access to financial aid. Each of these factors is a significant challenge; combined, they are portents of doom.

In addition to the commonly reported reason for failure to complete college – being the first person in one’s family to enroll in higher education – Taniguchi & Kaufman (2005) argue “the primary reason older female students with children drop out of college is family responsibilities” (p. 917). So that’s why “my girls” (my students) left school? I didn’t need a peer-reviewed research study to tell me that!

Even students attending classes for free, with stipends for housing, food, medical care, transportation, and childcare, face incredible obstacles. One student lost her home as a result of catastrophic health problems and ended up living in a car with her eight-year-old child. Another student’s financial aid disbursement was delayed, so she had to drop out of school and return to full-time work to keep her utility services uninterrupted. More than one student never knew from one day to the next after returning home from school whether her husband would beat her for “being uppity” (trying to better herself). Numerous students had to care for chronically ill parents, grandparents, or spouses in addition to being a mother and homemaker. Almost every student/mother at one time or other had no one to watch her children, so she was forced to bring the child(ren) to school in direct violation of campus policy (derived from lack of liability insurance coverage for non-adult campus visitors).

The for-profit career college and WIA programs in which I taught do/did not provide counseling for students beyond career placement, which is often minimal, at best. As their primary daily contact, I tried to listen and advise on all their problems, even though I was specifically instructed by my employers not to do so. My attitude, however, was (and is) that any life problem affecting a student’s performance in my classroom is a school-related problem.

In the for-profit career college environment, especially, adult female students with children need more than career counseling. They need life coaches. They need guided discussions and activities designed to help them challenge and conquer obstacles to completing their education. They need childcare alternatives. They

need experienced and knowledgeable champions to wage battles for them every now and then. Most of all, they need someone to listen.

Campus student services personnel are perfectly positioned to provide listeners, counselors, and innovative social support that will aid non-traditional students in completing their educational goals. Properly trained student services personnel could provide social counseling and community services' referrals. A community liaison in student services could create and maintain a list of community resources. Non-traditional students, especially those who have recently experienced a life-changing event, may be unaware of social services available to them.

If the student services department is located in an institution where such services are not provided, then student services professionals should lobby administrators for program implementation. In my own experience, students who find they can get not only academic information but information about resolving some of their life needs through counseling and support on campus are less likely to drop out.

Resources

- Chao, R. & Good, G. E. (2004). Nontraditional students' perspectives on college education: A qualitative study. *Journal of College Counseling* 7(1?), 5-12.
- King, J. (2003). Nontraditional attendance and persistence: The cost of students' choices. In King, J. E., Anderson, E. L., & Corrigan, M. E. (Eds.). *Changing student attendance patterns: Challenges for policy & practice: New directions for higher education No. 121*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Taniguchi, H. & Kaufman, G. (2005). Degree completion among nontraditional college students. *Social Science Quarterly* 86(4), 912-927.