UNDERSTANDING THE WORKING COLLEGE STUDENT

New Research and Its Implications for Policy and Practice

Edited by Laura W. Perna

Foreword by Glenn DuBois

STERLING, VIRGINIA
This book is dedicated to anyone who is striving
to complete an educational program
while also juggling the demands
of employment and other responsibilities.
I hope that this volume will lead to
improved support for and benefits from your efforts.
OVERCOMING ADVERSITY
Community College Students and Work

John S. Levin, Virginia Montero-Hernandez, and Christine Cerven

This chapter addresses the topic of working students in the community college to identify gaps in the literature, present and analyze empirical data about working students at community colleges, and point out pathways for further research. The chapter describes some of the predominant conditions that characterize the educational experiences of students who work while enrolled at community colleges. Two broad questions guide the structure of this chapter:

1. How do students who work (i.e., full and part time) while studying navigate their college experiences?
2. What are the factors that enable community college students to face the challenges, conflicts, and opportunities that emerge as a result of their two-dimensional status as workers and students?

To answer these questions we integrate quantitative data from national and state sources as well as qualitative data from community colleges in the states of California and New York. In so doing, we explain (a) the characteristics of the educational experiences of community college students who work and study as parallel activities in their daily lives, and (b) the factors, both organizational and personal, that influence the ways that the educational experiences of working students are constructed. Data interpretation is guided by the use of organizational and culture theory. We used this theoretical approach in our previous work to talk about the opportunities for development that students can achieve when community colleges offer sustained support as well as interactions that enable students to acquire new resources, skills, and perspectives (Levin & Montero-Hernandez, in
press). In this chapter, we extend that framework to analyze the experiences of working students at community colleges. The interpretation of both quantitative and qualitative data aims to offer a more complex understanding of (a) what it takes to be a working student in a community college, and (b) how community colleges can construct structures (e.g., programs and student services) to respond to this critical sector of their student body. This chapter provides interpretations that enable us to advance our understanding of the relationship between work and persistence within the specific context of the community college.

The chapter has two parts. First, we review statistical data at the national level to identify the characteristics that define working students (i.e., the great majority—80%—of the community college student population). The quantitative data we present show a negative relationship between full-time work and persistence, defined as attending 9 or more months and/or attaining a credential. However, data also suggest a positive relationship between working part time and persistence. The nature of the qualitative data prevents us from offering a detailed explanation of the reasons behind this latter finding. Clearly, more comprehensive data sets and qualitative studies are needed to construct more complex representations of the issues facing working students in community colleges.

In the second part of the chapter, we analyze qualitative data from community colleges in two states, Bakersfield College in California and Borough Manhattan Community College in New York, to gain a more in-depth understanding of the challenges, conflicts, and potential opportunities that community college students face when they have to work and study simultaneously. We discuss the character of the work-study conflict and its effects on the ways that students experience college. We refer to two kinds of factors that moderate the impact of the work-study conflict on students. Initially, we talk about the ways that organizational structures and institutional personnel or agents in community colleges respond to working students’ needs. Subsequently, we note the personal factors (e.g., motivation) that enable students to overcome the constraints that stem from having to perform two equally demanding roles: studying and working.

The Community College Context

The paradoxical condition for community colleges in the United States creates misunderstandings about the institution’s organizational behaviors and students as well as confusion about its purposes (Bailey & Moster, 2004; Cohen & Brawer, 1996; Frye, 1994). Community colleges are unique organizations, dramatically distinct from four-year colleges and universities. On the one hand, the community college is a nonselective, open-access institution. On the other hand, community colleges offer a host of programs that are subject to competitive entry for students. These institutions contain students who are comparable and qualitatively those at selective public universities and many who have specific occupational and vocational skills that exceed those of typical undergraduates. But the community college also enrolls students who lack high school completion; are intellectually and mentally challenged; are nonnative English speakers and virtually illiterate in their native language; and lack basic skills in mathematics, English, and computers. A large proportion of the student body at community colleges consists of nontraditional learners who are characterized by disadvantaged social class and ethnic backgrounds, academic deficiencies, and multiple roles (Astin, 1984; Baxter-Magolda, 2003; Cohen & Brawer, 1996; Heissner & Parette, 2002; Hoachlander, Sikora, & Horn, 2003; Levin, 2007). Community college students are adults with competing priorities who have to make choices to maintain other significant adult life roles while simultaneously working and studying (Ashton & Elliott, 2007; Kasworm, 2005).

With more than 6 million students enrolled in credit-bearing courses and an estimated 3 to 5 million in non-credit-bearing courses including continuing education programs such as English as a Second Language, adult education, and skills upgrading and community education programs, community colleges contain an astounding variety and spectrum of learners (Levin, 2007). Both learners’ goals and their needs are diverse and their use of the institution is highly variable (Adelman, 1992). These conditions alone suggest that the organizational behaviors within the community college are multifaceted.

Added to the multiple goals and needs of students are the expectations and requirements of the “community”—the businesses, higher education institutions, cities, regions, states, and national economy—that covers the products of community colleges. Taken together, this combination of students and community shapes the purposes and consequently the actions of the institution, which is arguably both postsecondary educational institution and the wide range of social service agencies, community resource, workforce developer, feeder school, citizenship pathway, adult learning center, international relations agent, and even university and professional athlete preparation. Thus, it should be no surprise that the community college adapts to the conditions of its students. As well, students adjust to, take advantage of, and reject the patterns of organizational behaviors that characterize the community college. We refer to these combined behaviors as the coconstruction of student and organizational identity (Levin & Montero-Hernandez, in press). Although the literature on student performance in college frames student characteristics as preeminent in student academic attainment (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), institutional effects may play a larger role for different student groups, such as adult students, and for different
and discussions of working students. In general, the literature on working community college students is characterized by a lack of cohesion in that the manner that work is related to students varies in its conceptualization as well as its connection to other student characteristics.

Our interest in this chapter is with the association between work and persistence for students attending community colleges. We first present national statistics and statewide statistics from California and New York that depict the association between work and student persistence within the community college. Next, we draw on qualitative interview data with students at Bakersfield College in California to understand how work affects the lives of these students. Finally, we use data from interviews with administrators at Borough of Manhattan City College in New York to identify organizational structures and processes that help and hinder students’ persistence in college.

Working Students at Community Colleges: The Numerical Picture

The quantitative data we analyze in this section were derived from two sources. First, we utilize data from the National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS: 04) conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). NCES issued a series of statistical reports focusing on particular topics using the NPSAS data; the report we use focuses on community college students (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). The NPSAS study is based on survey data collected from a sample of approximately 80,000 undergraduates including 25,000 community college students who were enrolled between July 1, 2003, and June 30, 2004. The second source is the American Association of Community Colleges’ report entitled National profile of community colleges: Trends and statistics (4th edition), which also draws on survey data collected by NCES in 2005 (Phillippe & Gonzalez Sullivan, 2005). Each national survey collected data on a variety of subjects ranging from student characteristics, attendance, and work to tuition, financial aid, and degree attainment. We consider these two sources to be reliable because each draws on a large, nationally representative sample.

Working full-time while enrolled is one “risk factor” known to reduce the likelihood of persisting to degree completion (Phillippe & Gonzalez Sullivan, 2005). Community college students average twice as many risk factors, including working full-time, as public four-year students (2.4 versus 1.1; Table 1). Of the entire community college student population, 41% work full time compared to only 21% of four-year college students. Because full-time work is considered a risk factor for all students in higher education and because a greater percentage of community college students work full time, the ways work may affect community college students’ educational outcomes are noteworthy.
TABLE 1
Percentage of Undergraduates With Risk Factors Associated
With Decreased Persistence in College: 2003–2004

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Risk Factor</th>
<th>Community College (%)</th>
<th>Public Four-Year (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Independent student</td>
<td>61.2</td>
<td>34.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delayed enrollment</td>
<td>50.3</td>
<td>23.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enrolled full-time</td>
<td>66.1</td>
<td>30.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has dependents</td>
<td>35.4</td>
<td>14.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single parent</td>
<td>17.2</td>
<td>6.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worked full time</td>
<td>40.8</td>
<td>22.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has GED or no HS diploma</td>
<td>11.6</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has at least one risk factor</td>
<td>85.7</td>
<td>51.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average number of risk factors</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Phillipe & Sullivan (2005, p. 53)

Community college students also work at different levels of intensity and duration than do four-year college students, as shown in Table 2. Table 2 represents the statistics for working students attending community colleges and public four-year colleges and universities. Nationally, a higher percentage of students in community colleges than in public four-year institutions work (79% versus 70%), and, among those who work, students at community colleges are more likely than students at public four-year institutions to work full time (about 50% versus 30%). These differences in the prevalence and intensity of working between students at community colleges and those at four-year colleges generally hold across student demographic characteristics.

With regard to the relationship between work and persistence, both community college and four-year college students who do not work are more likely to persist than students who do work. The measure of persistence we use was derived from an NPSAS survey that defined persistence as “attending college 9 or more months and/or attaining a credential” (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). Although this measure may appear to reflect a minor accomplishment, attending college for more than 9 months and/or attaining a credential for community college students is a considerable task given the multiple life circumstances facing these students. Working full time is detrimental for both community college and four-year college students’ persistence. However, as Table 3 exhibits, working full time is more detrimental...
### TABLE 2 (Continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Did Not Work (%)</th>
<th>Worked Part Time (%)</th>
<th>Worked Full Time (%)</th>
<th>Did Not Work (%)</th>
<th>Worked Part Time (%)</th>
<th>Worked Full Time (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18 and under</td>
<td>26.3</td>
<td>56.7</td>
<td>17.0</td>
<td>47.9</td>
<td>45.3</td>
<td>6.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19–23</td>
<td>18.5</td>
<td>50.3</td>
<td>31.2</td>
<td>28.4</td>
<td>58.3</td>
<td>13.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24–29</td>
<td>19.5</td>
<td>31.6</td>
<td>48.9</td>
<td>20.2</td>
<td>40.9</td>
<td>38.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30–39</td>
<td>24.1</td>
<td>24.3</td>
<td>51.6</td>
<td>23.4</td>
<td>27.3</td>
<td>49.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40 and older</td>
<td>24.1</td>
<td>21.2</td>
<td>54.7</td>
<td>25.2</td>
<td>23.6</td>
<td>51.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Income Levels**

| Low          | 28.0             | 42.5                 | 29.5                 | 32.9             | 50.9                 | 16.2                 |
| 25–74 Middle | 19.0             | 38.2                 | 42.8                 | 26.0             | 50.4                 | 23.6                 |
| 75–100 High  | 19.6             | 32.5                 | 47.9                 | 29.9             | 47.6                 | 22.6                 |

**Type of Institution**

| Public 2-year | 21.4             | 37.9                 | 40.8                 | 25.8             | 46.5                 | 27.6                 |
| Public 4-year, non-doctoral-granting | | | | 30.2             | 51.6                 | 18.2                 |
| Public doc-granting | | | | | | |


### TABLE 3

**Working Students’ Persistence Rates Nationally and in California and New York**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Community College Students</th>
<th>Public Four-Year Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Did Not Work (%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>CC/4YR</strong></td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nationally</td>
<td>3,460/3,598</td>
<td>53.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>California</td>
<td>675/285</td>
<td>51.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New York</td>
<td>157/188</td>
<td>63.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: Persistence is defined as attending 9 or more months and/or attaining a credential (NPSAS: 2004 UG) |

for community college students. Only 44.1% of community college students who work full time persist compared to 61.6% of four-year college students working full time.

Working part time does not appear to have the same detrimental effects as full-time work on persistence for community college students. Table 3 shows that, among community college students who work part time, there is a higher level of college persistence (59.2%) than for those who did not work at all (53.6%).

The limited nature of the quantitative data available in major databases restricts our understanding of part-time work and its relation to persistence. Part-time work is defined in the NPSAS survey as working between 2 and 35 hours; however, other important intervening factors such as where students work (e.g., on or off campus), what kinds of work they do, and for what reasons students work also need to be considered to gain a comprehensive understanding of the nature of part-time work for students. We can speculate that having a part-time job enables students to enhance their personal circumstances that, in turn, encourage them to persist in college. First, students who work part time can earn money to satisfy their college-related expenses (e.g., books, course fees, and transportation). Second, students who have a job related to the program area in which they are enrolled may find their working activities as sources to apply to and contrast with what they learn in college. Finally, among adult students, working may be a source of motivation because these students can identify themselves as productive people.

Table 4 indicates the relationship between working and persistence rates for community college students by gender. Persistence rates at community colleges are two to three percentage points higher for women than for men regardless of work status. The reasons for these gender gaps in persistence are as yet undocumented, but perhaps women respond to the community college environment better than their male counterparts. National trends also suggest that working full time is detrimental for the persistence of both men and women in the community college; both female and male students at community colleges suffer the same negative impact of working while studying. However, persistence rates are higher for students who work part time than for those who do not work and those who work full time, regardless of gender.

Table 5 displays the variations in the relationship between working and community college students’ persistence rates by race/ethnicity. For all racial/ethnic categories, full-time work is associated with lower rates of persistence. However, there is some slight variation among some ethnic groups. For African American and Asian community college students, all kinds of work (part and full time) are associated with lower persistence rates than not working. For all other racial groups (Whites, Latinos, Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, and American Indian/Alaskan), part-time work is associated with greater persistence than not working. Even though part-time work does not decrease persistence dramatically for African American and Asian community college students, work, in general, does appear to hinder their chances of persisting in college. The racial/ethnic differences in persistence may be related to students’ financial status. In addition, social and cultural capital theories may also inform this racial/ethnic variation in the relationship between work and persistence.

Finally, the persistence of working community college students grouped by income and dependency status shows several significant patterns, as displayed in Table 6. First, there is a marked distinction between dependent

<table>
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<th>TABLE 4</th>
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</table>

**Persistence Rates for Community College Students Nationwide by Gender and Working Status**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Did Not Work (%)</th>
<th>Worked Part Time (%)</th>
<th>Worked Full Time (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>52.9</td>
<td>57.3</td>
<td>42.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>54.0</td>
<td>60.6</td>
<td>45.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: Persistence is defined as attending 9 or more months and/or attaining a credential (NPSAS: 2004 UG). Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (2004), 2003–04 national profile of undergraduates in U.S. postsecondary education institutions (NPSAS: 2004 UG)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Did Not Work (%)</th>
<th>Worked Part Time (%)</th>
<th>Worked Full Time (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>55.9</td>
<td>54.7</td>
<td>44.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>52.7</td>
<td>61.1</td>
<td>44.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>53.1</td>
<td>57.6</td>
<td>45.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>55.8</td>
<td>54.4</td>
<td>47.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Am. Indian/Alaskan</td>
<td>46.8</td>
<td>60.5</td>
<td>40.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hawaiian/Pac. Islander</td>
<td>28.8</td>
<td>43.0</td>
<td>27.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: Persistence is defined as attending 9 or more months and/or attaining a credential (NPSAS: 2004 UG). Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (2004), 2003–04 National Profile of Undergraduates in U.S. Postsecondary Education Institutions (NPSAS: 2004 UG)*
TABLE 6

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Persistence Rates for Community College Students Nationwide by Income and Dependency Status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$0-4,999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$5,000-9,999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$10,000-14,999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$15,000-19,999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$20,000-29,999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$30,000-39,999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$40,000-49,999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$50,000-59,999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$60,000-69,999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$70,000-79,999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$80,000-89,999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$100,000+</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Persistence is defined as attending for one or more month during the academic year. (NASPCC, 2001; U.S. Postsecondary Education Reporting Systems (IPAS, 2001 USC).)

and independent students. We can see that dependent students who do not work persist at higher rates than their independent counterparts. In addition, dependent students who work part time and full time persist at higher rates than their independent counterparts. This pattern suggests that dependency status plays a role in persistence and that this status may be an intervening variable in work and persistence. We could reasonably assume that dependency on one's family involves a stronger support system that these students may look to when distressed. Family members may also provide students with motivational and financial support when faced with the challenges inherent in postsecondary education. As well, independent students may have dependents and these responsibilities take time away from college work (Bowl, 2003).

In sum, full-time work is a characteristic that decreases community college students' persistence across social categories. Community college students who work full time may not allot enough time to devote to their studies, thus making it difficult to keep up with their college work. On the other hand, not working or working part time appears to be a general trend that facilitates persistence. Having an income at one's disposal allows students who work part time to pay for necessary college materials such as books and transportation, and because the work is not full time, students are able to devote adequate time to their college work. However, the nature of the quantitative data available makes it difficult to determine just how much part-time working students do work and what the conditions of work were for these students (e.g., on or off campus).

Community College Working Students' Educational Experiences: The Qualitative Summary

The quantitative data we present show that working full time is detrimental for community college students. But working part time is related to increased levels of persistence. The databases we examine offer limited information to explain what it means for college students to be both students and workers (full or part time) or what enables students to persist at college when they have to work while studying. Although we know the detrimental effects of working full time while studying, we know little about those cases in which community college students are capable of achieving their educational goals despite their at-risk conditions. There is a lack of studies about working students' educational experiences, sources of support, and coping strategies (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1998).

Our qualitative summary considers the ways that working community college students live the process of working and studying and the kinds of organizational and personal conditions that can enable community college
students to persist in the midst of their multiple roles, responsibilities, and challenges. We analyzed the narratives of working students and college personnel at Bakersfield College (Bakersfield) in California and college personnel at Borough of Manhattan Community College (BMCC) in New York to explain how work relates to students. We present qualitative data on California and New York because the patterns in these states largely mirror the national pattern. We decided to analyze these two states on the basis of the availability of bivariate databases as well as previous fieldwork conducted in these two sites and 11 other community colleges across seven other states in the nation. Student populations in these states reflect the national population both demographically and in terms of students’ amount of work and persistence.

Bakersfield College in Kern County, California, is one of the state’s oldest community colleges, originating in 1913. A major focus of the institution is underrepresented populations and students at risk of dropping out. The majority of students at Bakersfield were female, 60.4% of the students were between 19 and 24 years old. Borough of Manhattan Community College, located in downtown Manhattan, is acclaimed as the largest community college in the city university system (The City University of New York). Although from its origins BMCC provided liberal arts education to students who planned to transfer to four-year colleges, its primary focus was to enact a business/technical-oriented mission. The majority of the student population was female (63%). African American and Hispanic students were 68% of the student body, and the average age of students was 23.8 years old.

The Work-School Conflict Among Nontraditional Students

For students in higher education, work has been identified as a “situational constraint” that causes competing demands for time and attention (Keith, 2007). Working students continually have to decide which role to play in a demanding life context (Smith, 2006). Both at Bakersfield and BMCC, college personnel noted that the student body mainly consisted of nontraditional students (e.g., low socioeconomic status, abused lives, undocumented immigrant status, special education needs, minority groups, and the like) whose concerns revolved around work activities. Thus, we use the term nontraditional to identify the majority population of community college students who work and who possess at least one other characteristic that defines them as nontraditional college students (Levin, 2007). We argue that work has a more negative effect on nontraditional than traditional students in that work activities (on or off campus) aggravate the already present instability in their lives. Previous studies have shown that nontraditional students tend to have unsettled lives that hinder their opportunities to identify paths toward

new forms of self-understanding, educational goals, and professional identities (Kim, 2002; Lange, 2004; Levin, 2007). Working excessive hours (i.e., more than 20 hours per week) becomes a negative influence on nontraditional students’ process of development when job activities intensify the disorientation in their lives and become a source of anxiety, stress, isolation, and unhealthy behaviors (Ashton & Elliott, 2007; Miller, Danner, & Staten, 2008; Smith, 2006).

We argue that nontraditional students who face a role conflict (i.e., student versus worker) in the midst of distressed pasts and precarious futures are not only trying to achieve a sense of stability in their lives but are also trying to manage the transition to academic culture. Most working students in community colleges in their late 20s are unfamiliar with the academic environment and the accompanying expectations, including required academic skills (Horn & Neville, 2006; McSwain & Davis, 2007). For all students, attending a community college is a constant experience of adaptation in which they have to learn how to maximize their time, efforts, and learning experiences to become integrated into the academic and social dynamics that characterize college life (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002; Chaves, 2006). Students who work while studying struggle to learn how to change their lack of understanding of higher education to become insiders of academic culture (Kasworm, 2001; O’Donnell & Tobbell, 2007). The amount of time that work-related activities require of nontraditional students, however, may reduce opportunities for students to acknowledge and access the personal and institutional resources they can use to understand academic culture and become insiders.

Successful Working Students and Their Support Structures

We understand that a successful student is someone who can understand academic culture and utilize it to participate in educational practices that enable student to reach higher levels of personal, professional, and occupational development. At Bakersfield, college personnel acknowledged that to create successful students, they needed to organize academic experiences (i.e., forms of interaction and instructional techniques) that enabled nontraditional working students to manage the everyday routines that resulted from having to execute various roles. We found that overcoming the work-school conflict among nontraditional working students was directly associated with the support that college personnel can provide to these students.

In my class [in the nursing program] we talk about time management, test taking, the pressure. . . . [It’s] difficult to work and go to school with what is demanded. So how do you prepare? . . . [It’s] something that we recognized as an issue and it directly impacts their ability to be successful. How
do you handle the stress, the anxiety, all those things? (Jennifer, faculty, Nursing, Bakersfield)

We use the concept of support structures to refer to those student programs, organizational spaces, and institutional agents' behaviors that enabled students to learn about the academic culture, improve their academic performance, identify future goals and pursue further education, obtain a credential, transfer to a university, develop self-confidence, and/or acquire a better job. Examples of support structures include counseling, peer mentoring, flexible scheduling, and tutoring programs.

We provide three component areas of support [counseling, academic advising, and tutoring] to help students become mainstream, because the notion has been that a number of these inner city students were not initially able to go to college. . . . They [students] do have the distractions outside of the school. . . . Once they buy into the [Discovery] program they [have to] come in and talk and try to get at whatever distractions are that might be affecting them, talk to their counselors or their advisors. (director, Discovery Program, BMCC)

Similar to the findings in other studies, we note that when social support and guidance are offered to nontraditional working students, despite their challenging conditions, they achieve personal and social development such as confidence (Baxter-Magolda, 2003; Baxter-Magolda & Kingham, 1997; Kaufman & Feldman, 2003; Dutton, Dukerich, & Harquail, 1994), skills, knowledge (Ellermann, Kataoka-Yahiro, & Wong, 2006), and social cultural awareness (Belgarde, Mitchell, & Arquero, 2002; Lange, 2004). Students' transition into higher education is facilitated when academic practices are designed to promote student engagement and a sense of belonging (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002; Chang, 2001; Hagedorn, Maxwell, Rodriguez, Hoevar, & Fillpot, 2000; McArthur, 2005; O'Donnell & Tobbell, 2007). The creation of positive educational experiences for nontraditional working students occurred when college personnel (1) acknowledged students' needs and opportunities, (2) managed to create "connected classrooms" in which learners' experiences are validated as reservoirs of knowledge and connected to academic studies, (3) created both sources of challenge and support for students to expand their capacities, and (4) facilitated learning experiences based on relational and caring ways (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002; Chaves, 2006; Kasworm, 2005; Keith, 2007; Keith, Byerly, Floerchinger, Pence, & Thornberg, 2006).

College personnel were interested not only in implementing strategies to facilitate educational experiences but also in ensuring the persistence of nontraditional working students. Nontraditional working students at Bakersfield were capable of excelling in their formal educational experiences as a result of the combined work of college personnel and students.

I've seen programs . . . integrating more real life learning examples into their curriculum, drawing upon students, student life learning experiences to illustrate teaching points or teaching objectives. I'm seeing in some areas the schedule shifts are late afternoon, evening, . . . We have had classes on Saturday in some of the areas that I have responsibility for, with those working adults here. (Nan, Dean of Student Learning, Bakersfield)

At BMCC, college personnel were interested not only in implementing strategies to facilitate educational experiences but also in ensuring the persistence of nontraditional working students:

[Students] may move out of state with family, so they just discontinue school. Some will have just stopped attending because they found temporary jobs. . . . [We] try to go after those students. . . . We do have structured programs for those academically challenged ones. [We] work closer with them prior to the point that we consider to be at-risk. (director, Discovery Program, BMCC)

 Working students at Bakersfield emphasized their improved capacities to think about themselves and to define and manage their future plans when they received support from college personnel:

I learned how to [manage] my studies better . . . I learned a lot about life that I didn't know. . . . [Faculty] made me realize that I can get a degree; they made me believe in myself. (James, liberal arts student, Bakersfield)

I learned how to find myself in [the speech class] actually . . . I discovered I'm stronger than I thought. I discovered that I don't always have to say yes to everything. . . . I'm stronger in my goals. I can do this; I can just keep on, never give up, just keep going, keep going, keep going. (Nidia, pre-nursing student, Bakersfield)

Students going through a process of transition became incorporated into higher educational culture when they participated in academic practices as well as formal and informal social encounters with peers and college personnel (O'Donnell & Tobbell, 2007; Pacarella, 1980; Pacarella, Pietron, Woliak, & Terenzini, 2004; Pacarella & Terenzini, 1976, 1978, 1998). At Bakersfield and BMCC, students noted repeatedly that most of their academic achievements resulted from the interaction and support they found among faculty and staff.
My best experiences here would probably be the networking that went on here with the instructors, with students... They [college staff] have been extremely helpful. Mentors are almost like an open book of knowledge... [A] lot of times when I find myself in a situation that I don't find any avenues or exits to get out of, I'll ask questions. So besides the supportive services, there's a group of individuals here at Bakersfield College that have helped me along, helped support me and kind of carry me on so that I may succeed in what I'm trying to accomplish. (Jose, student, Anthropology and Forestry, Bakersfield)

Faculty members and administrators acknowledged that students' active engagement was central to them to achieve social and academic integration at community colleges. Our analysis supports other studies that have confirmed that social support is critical for higher education students to overcome the school–work conflict: The greater the quality and amount of support enjoyed by working students, the lesser the level of perceived strain (Adevay, 2006). College personnel both at Bakersfield and BMCC were concerned with constructing well-organized educational experiences that provided comprehensive support to their students. Nontraditional students, who play both the role of worker and student, have greater opportunities to learn and achieve their goals when they are exposed to sources for support such as small group practice, personalized attention, flexible scheduling, and the integration of college and working (Brewer et al., 2003).

Personal Factors That Moderate the Work–Study Conflict

We argue that becoming a successful working student may depend not only on the existence of support structures and relational practices but also on students’ agentic approach to their participation decisions. We understand one's agentic power as the capacity to coordinate thinking and actions to work on the definition and achievement of goals (Ottмер, 2006). Agentic power can be constructed as part of a process of identity development and the construction of self-authorship (Baxter-Magolda & King, 2007; Pizzolato, 2003; Swidler, 2003). We found that students who excelled in college while working exhibited self-confidence and motivation to cope with multiple role demands. We suggest that nontraditional working students who persisted both at Bakersfield and BMCC were individuals who expressed their capacity of agency by developing personal projects or plans to gain academic knowledge, personal development, and working skills and qualifications. Students who persisted were motivated and developed a sense of self-confidence to define strategies of action to navigate their college experience. Working students at Bakersfield exhibited strong personal commitments:

They wanted to improve their lives by developing new attitudes and capacities to manage their everyday challenges and context demands.

I'm 43. I'm a single mom of 6, first generation college student. Growing up I was never encouraged to go to college. Ended up in an abusive marriage: 2 years ago got out. And knew the only way we could stand on our own two feet was for me to come back to school... I also work in addition to going to school and taking care of my family... I had to fight to get here... I fought and I got here. And I graduate in May. (Ellen, recency student, Human Services program, Bakersfield)

Not all of the nontraditional working students were confident or had personal plans when they enrolled at Bakersfield or BMCC; however, the colleges' support structures enabled students to develop personal attributes (e.g., motivation and confidence) that moderated the negative effects of the work–study conflict. Students who worked while studying at Bakersfield were able to achieve their educational goals as a result of the personal development that they reached as part of their engagement in academic practices and their close interactions with college personnel.

Both at Bakersfield and BMCC, we found that nontraditional working students who were academic achievers expressed their agentic approach by developing coping styles that enabled them to respond to their multiple role demands. Morris, Brooks, and May (2003) suggest that a coping style is the typical manner in which an individual confronts a stressful situation. Working students have to develop specific styles of coping to be able to achieve their educational goals and perform proficiently in classrooms. Morris and colleagues found that nontraditional students tended to develop a "task-oriented coping style" that involved a student choosing to cope with stress by seeking practical and mapping solutions. Nontraditional students' frequent use of task-oriented coping may be associated with the necessity of having to move across multiple roles and tasks. Students who persisted at college explained the strategies they developed to accomplish their academic demands in the midst of everyday life.

I'm concentrating on one subject first. I want to go in and do writing classes. English classes. I want to do all my English at once. That way when I get in the science classes, I want to just do all science classes. That's why I'm not. I don't like to mix them all together, so that way I want to concentrate on one thing, know what I'm doing to get to the next step... After I had my last child... he's three now. I decided I wanted to do something better than what I'm doing now and that's why I decided to come back to school... I work full-time; I'm a mom and I come part-time to school... I'm taking three courses, so mostly I study just all morning and afternoon until 500, from 8 to 1. (Nidia, pre-nursing student, Bakersfield)
These nontraditional working students who reached positive developmental outcomes (e.g., self-confidence, a certificate, an associate’s degree) were supported by college structures designed to promote personal growth, future expectations, and acquisition of new skills. Support systems enabled students to develop confident selves and strategies of engagement (e.g., task-oriented coping style) to navigate their college experiences.

Conclusion

Work is certainly a central characteristic of community college students. Yet, as this and other chapters in this volume describe, research is scarce on the understanding of and theorizing about students who work and attend community colleges. Quantitative data sources do not classify types of work and whether the work is educationally related or not. Available databases offer limited information to gain a rich understanding about the relationships among (1) the nature of the work activities that students perform, (2) the characteristics of community college students (e.g., varied roles, low incomes, and weak academic backgrounds), and (3) students’ academic behaviors in college. Qualitative research can help to close the gaps in the literature and identify conceptual tools to make sense of the educational experiences of working students in community colleges. Scholars and researchers should review and renew previous research on community colleges and their students, particularly on student outcomes, incorporating student conditions such as work as major variables on the one hand and as a framework for understanding how college affects students and what students actually achieve. We suggest that research on community college students take a new direction in emphasizing the personal and life conditions (e.g., social and economic contexts) of students, the actions of institutions to accommodate these conditions, and the relationships between and among these conditions, institutional actions, and persistence.

Our findings emphasize that the work-study conflict is more detrimental for nontraditional working students than it is for other students. The vast majority (80%) of community college students can be viewed as nontraditional students. This population has to face conflicting roles in the midst of already strenuous conditions that demand both stability in their daily lives and their integration into academic life. Having to decide between the roles of student or worker is a source of stress and a constraint that may hamper attainment for those who do not have structures of support to navigate the varied responsibilities attached to multiple roles. Students who work and especially those who work full time have limited opportunities to engage socially and academically with other students, college personnel, or institutional life more generally. Both the positive and negative effects of engagement or its lack thereof are dependent on student characteristics (e.g., age, academic background, domestic status, financial status, native language, and physical condition). College programs that endeavor to support students would be wise to be adaptable to the populations that they serve. College services, such as counseling, day care, health, and library, would have greater saliency if they were adaptable to specific populations. For example, services that are available during nighttime or weekend classes would accommodate students who work in the day or during the week and attend classes only at night or on weekends.

Support structures may enable nontraditional working students to persist and even excel in college by strengthening personal and academic dimensions such as self-confidence, critical thinking, social networking, and decision making. Academic practices that emphasize interaction and dialogue among students and college personnel enable students not only to be integrated socially and academically into college life but also to develop personal goals, such as career pathways (Levin et al., 2008). Institutions have acted both formally and informally to offer support to ensure persistence. The actions of particular institutional agents in this regard can move beyond the norms or policies of institutions to provide appropriate service or help for students. More can be done to understand behaviors of both institutions, generally, and, specifically, institutional agents. We have begun to theorize “coconstruction” of student and organizational identity as a central and defining condition that explains the institution-student nexus that can advance student development, including persistence (Levin & Montero-Hernandez, in press).

We speculate that both practice and policy, at the state level and at the institutional level, can gain from attention to research and knowledge about students’ conditions, specifically their lives as workers who are students or as students who work. Policymakers and state legislators need to be better informed about community college students, the overwhelming majority of whom work. The community college serves the least academically prepared and the least advantaged population of postsecondary students. These are the students with the greatest needs, and to fulfill their financial needs and attend college, they must work (Levin, 2007). Yet of all public educational institutions, community colleges are the least well state funded and the least financially endowed to help these lives as workers who are students or as students who work. The community college serves the least academically prepared and the least advantaged population of postsecondary students. These are the students with the greatest needs, and to fulfill their financial needs and attend college, they must work (Levin, 2007). Yet of all public educational institutions, community colleges are the least well state funded and the least financially endowed to help these students (Bailey & Most, 2006). Students work to support themselves, or their families, or their college attendance, or any combination of these. Work, certainly at the level of full-time work, distracts students, takes time away from college and formal learning.
and is associated with lack of persistence and potentially lower grades. Financial support from the state as well as from institutions may enable students to limit work hours and certainly refrain from full-time work.

Endnotes

1. Part-time work is defined by the Nation Center for Education Statistics (NCES) as any amount of hours worked during 15 hours per week (NPSAS: 2003 UG).

2. The demographic statistics for California and New York are available on request.

References


