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mae stephenson

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Listening to Their Voices: Career Development for Nontraditional Students

mae stephenson

Nontraditional students are a burgeoning population on American college campuses. However, many current support systems were developed with only the needs of traditional students in mind. As career-related factors often serve as an impetus for adults to return to the academy, it is vital for career services professionals to proactively develop and adapt relevant services for these students. The author provides an overview of career services, nontraditional student experiences, and the differences traditional and nontraditional students have in their career development processes. Additionally, suggestions are made for new and more relevant research as well as ways career centers can begin to address nontraditional student needs now.

As time progresses, people with increasingly diverse identities are forging the path to college. Among these diversities is life experience: while the traditional student is understood to be heading to college straight from high school, many students are now taking a break in their education. Some scholars are beginning to see these nontraditional students as “now-traditional” (Kennan & Lopez, 2005). As shifts occur in student populations, it is vital for student affairs professionals to keep up with the changes by providing relevant services to students. Career centers are among these student services, and more research is needed to determine how they can better support nontraditional students. This article will begin with an overview of career counseling and of nontraditional students, discuss the burgeoning research involving both topics, and conclude with suggestions for further areas to study as well as immediate ways career centers can better support nontraditional student needs.

Career Counseling: An Overview

If one asks a group of one hundred people the simple question, “Who are you?” approximately 95 percent will respond in terms of what they do for a living. They will say, ‘I’m a teacher,’ ‘I’m a secre-

mae stephenson is a second-year HESA student who earned her B.S. in Women’s Studies at Portland State and her A.A. at Seattle Central Community College. Her commitment to supporting nontraditional, first-generation, and working class college students as they navigate higher education brought her into the field of student affairs. Her passion for social justice and centering non-dominant identity experiences at both the individual and structural levels is a driving force in her work.

tary,' 'I'm an engineer,' or 'I'm a....' In other words, most people define who they are in terms of their occupations. As Super has put it, "The choice of a career is the implementation of a self-concept." (Rayman, 1993, p. 10)

Many people define the "self" by what they do. Even small children have lofty dreams of what they will be when they grow up. Career development starts at a young age and remains an integral part of a person's identity for much of hir¹ life. Figuring out a career path that represents a person, aligns with hir values, and suits hir skills takes a lot of exploration and preparation. In essence, career counselors work with current students and graduates through these processes; however, the inner-workings of career centers vary between institutions.

Some career centers focus their energies on job placement, while many others emphasize a more holistic approach to career development. Over time, the central task and guiding philosophies of career centers have evolved. Currently, common tasks include reviewing resumes and graduate school applications, strategizing with students about how to approach a job search, hosting mock interviews, discussing career options and majors, keeping a database of jobs and internships, and helping students answer the question, "What do I do after graduation?" Career centers perform these tasks in a variety of ways, including drop-in appointments, one-on-one counseling, phone appointments, group workshops, and online resources. These services have all been influenced by foundational theory and the changing landscape of the job market.

Jeffrey Traiger (2006) described three generations of career development. The first generation is represented by Frank Parsons's 1909 trait-factor theory and postulated a matching process between fixed traits an individual possesses and the requirements of a job. The second generation expanded on trait-factor theory with John Holland's theory of career development, which introduced six personality types and six corresponding environment types. According to Holland, individuals are drawn to the environment to which their personality is most similar. He suggested that "career choice [is] an expression of identity development" (Traiger, 2006, p. 11). Traiger's (2006) third generation was defined as a postmodern approach, beginning around the 1990s, that recognized personal milestones in career development that connect an individual's own meaning-making; it also recognized other life roles an individual may hold in addition to that of worker.

The three generations loosely coincide with shifting norms in career development and make a pendulum swing from the emphasis on the job to the

¹ This author has chosen to use the gender-neutral pronouns ze (he/she) and hir (his/her) in order to be inclusive of those who identify outside of the gender binary.

individual. In the first generation of theory, individual satisfaction came second to performance, and people often stayed within one organization throughout their career (Traiger, 2006). By the early 1990s, it was common to “hold from five to fifteen different jobs” (Rayman, 1993, p. 10) over a lifetime, and career theory had become more person-centered and open to a course of development instead of a one-time decision.

Donald Super’s work also represents this shift. A key career development theorist, Super synthesized existing career theories into a segmented Life-Span Life-Space theory, which he continually updated and expanded over forty years (Salomone, 1996). Part of his theory involved a series of life stages in relation to career development: growth, exploration, establishment, maintenance and decline. Each stage has a corresponding age range. However, in the early 1980s, he updated his theory to include the concept of recycling, which represented minicycles of the stages that happen during times of transition (such as beginning a new job, changing careers, or becoming a parent), thus making his theory more inclusive of a variety of life experiences (Salomone, 1996).

In addition to theory, the work of career services has been shaped by the economy and resulting job markets. The economic downturn of the 1990s resulted in recent college graduates competing for jobs with highly experienced, recently laid-off professionals (Rayman, 1993). Career centers that had successfully focused on job placement experienced less demand from employers looking to interview and recruit on campus, while demand for career planning and counseling services began to increase.

As multiple external influences alter the terrain of career development, both theorists and professionals must continue to reassess and adapt in order to meet the changing needs of individuals.

Nontraditional Students: An Overview

As career centers consider ways to remain relevant to students, there is a rapidly increasing student population to contemplate. While the exact numbers may be conflicting, nontraditional students are becoming more prevalent. Chao and Good (2004) found over 40% of U.S. undergraduates to be nontraditional students; however, other sources claim that only 27% of college students today could be considered traditional (Kennen & Lopez, 2005; Larkin, LaPort, & Pines, 2007). This discrepancy could be a result of differences in definition: generally, nontraditional students are defined as individuals who are 25 years or older (Chao & Good 2004; Luzzo, 1993; Quimby & O’Brien, 2004). Larkin et al. (2007) defined a traditional student as one “who earns a high school diploma, enrolls full time immediately after finishing high school, depends on parents for

financial support, and works, at most, ‘part time’” (p. 87).

Career counselors must also consider other aspects of students’ complex identities. A student might be a Person of Color, the first person in his family to attend college, a parent or caretaker, a full- or part-time employee, working-class, queer, a person with a disability, a military veteran, or identify anywhere along the gender spectrum. All of these identities, roles, and skills, as well as others gone unmentioned, interact uniquely in each student’s life and may present challenges or opportunities as the student navigates his way into and through college.

What this might mean for a nontraditional student returning to the academy will vary, but some scholars have contributed research on the topic. Carol Kasworm (2010) found that adult students entered college with “anxiety” and “self-consciousness,” (p. 145) and experienced “a sense of otherness” (p. 150) due to the youth-oriented campus culture. However, more “seasoned” returning students “believed they could use their adult honed skills to negotiate their needs and gain acceptance” (p. 150). While the students in Kasworm’s study did see their status as a “potential disadvantage,” they did not understand their “age and life responsibilities [to be] obstacles” (p. 152). In fact, returning to school was a confidence booster for many involved in the study.

In an interview with Ronald Chesbrough, David Bergh discussed finding similar results about nontraditional college students and encouraged educators to “[turn] deficiency thinking upside down” (Chesbrough, 2010, p. 8). Bergh found that students developed skills and strengths through overcoming the adversity of the past. Similar to the adult students in Kasworm’s study, the participants thought of their experiences as positive “assets that they regularly leveraged” (Chesbrough, 2010, p. 8). Bergh asserted that professionals must not view the experiences of nontraditional students as a deficiency because this thinking affects the way they provide services. Professionals can better serve students by validating their experiences and by exposing ways they can use those experiences to their benefit.

Still, returning to college is a costly sacrifice (Kennen & Lopez, 2005). To complicate matters, many faculty members and administrators have little understanding of the working college student (Perna, 2010), and many nontraditional students do not have the luxury or desire to study without working. According to Laura Perna (2010), most faculty members believe students should work no more than “ten to fifteen hours per week, on campus” (p. 30) and that working can be an additional distraction from their academic priorities. This contradicts the idea that work is a meaningful learning experience that can provide students with tools applicable to success in the classroom. Perna (2010) challenges fac-

ulty and administrators to reconsider the idea that work undermines education and consider it as “promoting student learning” (p. 31). More understanding from faculty and administrators could increase a sense of belonging and provide opportunity for better support.

Intersections: Research on the Career Development of Nontraditional Students

Career counselors are in a unique position to support nontraditional students because career goals are central to nontraditional students’ decisions to return to school (Chao & Good, 2004; Luzzo, 1993, 2000; Quimby & O’Brien, 2004). Darrel Luzzo (2000) found that economic factors are often impetus for adults to pursue higher education. Chao and Good (2004) found nontraditional students returning because “they felt stuck with their current jobs,” because they wanted “to change career goals via college education,” or because of “life transitions... [which] force them to change to different jobs” (p. 9). Clearly, there is an important relationship between the work of career counselors and nontraditional students. Most career services offices were originally developed for traditionally-aged college students, and research shows that while there are similarities between traditional and nontraditional student career development needs, there are also major differences.

For example, there seems to be no clear relationship between a student’s age and “CDM [career decision-making] attitudes [or] CDM skills” (Luzzo, 1993, p. 114). However, nontraditional students often have a clearer idea of, and commitment to, their career choice, and they are also more likely to name “substantial numbers of barriers to reaching their chosen occupational goal (e.g., economic barriers, multiple-role conflict)” (Luzzo, 2000, p. 195). Luzzo (1993) also found higher levels of apprehension, uneasiness, and anxiety around career development issues. Career counselors could be supportive by focusing on confidence building and addressing real barriers faced by nontraditional students. They could also emphasize skills the student has already developed and how those skills might be transferrable to current career-related dilemmas.

Another common theme in the study of nontraditional students’ career development is Bandura’s (1977) theory of self-efficacy. Quimby and O’Brien (2004), who conducted a study on career decision-making self-efficacy among nontraditional college women, described it as “the belief in one’s ability to successfully perform a specific task” and further explained that it “has been linked to initiation of behaviors, persistence despite obstacles, and successful performance,” with low levels of career self-efficacy relating to “career indecisiveness, an external career locus of control, and problems with career exploration” (p. 324).

Their study found that nontraditional college women had very high levels of confidence in both managing student responsibilities and career-related endeavors. However, participants did face career-related barriers, and those most likely to influence their self-efficacy were “multiple role conflict, discouragement from choosing nontraditional careers, and conflict between children and career demands” (Quimby & O’Brien, 2004, p. 335). Examples of multiple roles might be employee, mother, and student. They specifically named childcare issues as a major concern, demonstrating a need for better childcare options for student parents (Quimby and O’Brien, 2004).

Barbara Fultz (1993) found that career counseling workshops could positively influence nontraditional students’ career self-efficacy, indicating the significance of “brief counseling interventions” for returning adult students (p. 44). Quimby and O’Brien (2004) determined that relationships in which there were shared interests, experiences, and pursuits were a source of support for nontraditional college women. This could indicate why the workshops in Fultz’s study were successful, but further research would be necessary to state that relationship more confidently.

Nontraditional students also draw support from themselves. Larkin et al. (2007) found returning adult students to be more self-motivated than traditional college seniors. This corresponds with the notion that nontraditional students see their previous life experiences as advantageous rather than as a barrier and that those experiences have provided them with tools to be successful.

Jeffrey Traiger (2006) studied the differences between nontraditional students who saw their primary role as an employee (which he termed as Employees Who Study [EWS]) and those who saw their primary role as a student (Students Who Work [SWW]). He found EWS supports to be more similar to those of nontraditional students (e.g. already existing relationships outside of school), and SWW supports more akin to traditional students (e.g. a need for new relationships from which to draw support). This is an example of the variations that exist within nontraditional student experiences.

Other sources of support include a balance of enjoyable activities and work or school duties (Traiger, 2006), verbal recognition of nontraditional college women’s competencies (Quimby & O’Brien, 2004), and a core sense of hopefulness that influenced other areas including actions, perceptions, and motivation (Chao & Good, 2004). Again, these sources may vary between and within traditional and nontraditional students. While similarities exist between the two groups, there are substantial differences that must be taken into consideration in order to provide relevant services to returning adult students.

Recommendations for Further Research

In addition to these findings, further research is needed. One area would be additional exploration of how nontraditional and traditional students vary and compare in career development needs. Another would be potential differences that might exist for nontraditional students who attend institutions with predominantly traditional students versus those who attend institutions with predominantly nontraditional students. Luzzo (2000) called for experimental research by career counselors to determine the effectiveness of traditional methods with nontraditional students. Finally, research exploring the effects of intersecting marginalized identities would promote a better understanding of students and how career counselors could provide more relevant services for all.

Recommendations for Practice

While there may be an unknown number of possibilities for further research, a multitude of recommendations for practice are already within reach. It is important to recognize that limited resources are available to many career services offices. While this may influence the types of support offered to nontraditional students, this should not hinder specialized support altogether. It is also important to find innovative ways to meet students' needs while still allowing for personalized, one-on-one services.

Some concerns of particular relevance to nontraditional students include: time constraints that might occur with multiple roles; limited awareness of available services, as most returning students do not live on campus and may attend part-time or participate in distance learning opportunities, providing fewer opportunities for exposure; and anxiety related to campus and cultural norms regarding student age. With these notions in mind, here are recommendations for more inclusive practices:

- Online resume review and editing by career counselors;
- Phone and online instant messaging options for drop-in or full-length counseling appointments;
- A comfortable, quiet, and child-friendly place to research jobs and work on resumes between work or class and an appointment;
- More accessible hours, including evenings and weekends;
- Close proximity to other resources (while moving an entire office may not be possible, a career counselor could host a drop-in table in the student center);
- Targeted outreach to nontraditional students to inform them of the resources available;
- Partnerships with campus faculty who may have more contact with

nontraditional students;

- Workshops and networking events specifically for nontraditional students with detailed information relevant to their career development concerns; and,
- Strategies for increasing confidence related to career development (e.g. discuss transferrable skills learned in previous life experiences).

It would also be beneficial to consult practitioners working with nontraditional students on a regular basis, although it is important to keep in mind that different campuses may produce different concerns. Golden Gate University is a college campus with an average student age of 34 (“Best Practices,” 2010). Leah Antignas, director of career planning at the time of publishing, recommended being very particular about strategies and tools to use when working with nontraditional students, as most of them were developed with younger students in mind. Antignas also recommended collaborating with faculty. “Best Practices” (2010) divided students into three categories: career advancers, career changers, and career launchers. If career services offices offered specialized support for each of these three areas, students could self-select the best category regardless of their age, and all students could receive the most relevant support to their individual experiences.

Summary

More and more students are returning to the academy after a break in their education, and they are largely returning to advance or restart their careers. Traditional and nontraditional students have different career development needs, and most strategies and resources were developed for traditionally-aged students. Further, nontraditional students have differing needs based on their unique experiences, as well as their intersecting identities and multiple life roles. Foundational career theories can be fluid and adaptable based on new developments in the job market and employment norms. Career services providers should update current processes in order to better support this growing student population. While there are options for improving those strategies now, more research is necessary for colleges and universities to provide the most relevant services possible for every student who attends.

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