A Comparison of the Psychosocial Developmental Levels of Traditional Freshman and Nontraditional Freshman Students: Are They Really Different?

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Data collected during new-student orientation on nontraditional-age freshman and traditional-age freshman students, who had never before attended an institution of higher education, indicated that there were more psychosocial similarities than differences between them. This research suggests that first-entry nontraditional students experience some of the same needs and concerns in higher education as do their younger peers. Referrals to existing advising services may help these students overcome discouragements and barriers to success in their educational endeavors.

Increasing enrollments of nontraditional students who have never before attended a college or university have prompted research into the characteristics and needs of adults who enter academic institutions in which student peers are 10, 20, or even 40 years younger than themselves. Apparent needs and behaviors of these older students seem to conflict with historically established views of conventional developmental theory (Chickering & Havighurst, 1981; Low & Bailey, 1990; Richter–Antion, 1986; Schlossberg, Lynch, & Chickering, 1989; Slaney, 1986). In order for administrators and advisors to adopt practices that will maximize the educational experience of older students, understandings and misconceptions about ways in which they do and do not differ from those of traditional-age college students must be further delineated and explored.

Research into the requirements of nontraditional students and into administrative and advising adaptations to meet them is scarce and contradictory. Utley (1989) and Nidiffer and Moore (1985) found that nontraditional students' needs are not receiving administrative priority. Unfortunately, neglect and ambivalence toward identifying and meeting their needs has taken its toll on the retention of first-time nontraditional freshman students (Chartrand, 1990).

At the university at which this study was conducted, 60% of the students who withdrew during the first 3 weeks of the 1991 autumn quarter were first-entry freshmen of nontraditional age—between 23 and 50. Yet this age group constituted only 12% of the total 1991 first-entry freshman enrollment. Data derived from 1992, 1993, and 1994 first-entry freshmen revealed similar attrition patterns, with nontraditional-age students dropping out at substantially higher rates than traditional-age students after the initial autumn quarter. Nontraditional student attrition rates were 39%, 39%, and 38% respectively while the attrition rates for the traditional-age freshmen were 23%, 20%, 21% (3-week data were unavailable for these years). The reasons which were given by nontraditional students during exit interviews for dropping out included: class difficulties, employment conflicts, family demands (no support from family), scheduling difficulties, financial problems, personal health, lack of educational goals, no study time, misadvisement, and dislike of faculty. Traditional-age students who withdrew had similar complaints. Students who were enrolled in only one class were not included in the exit interviews.

Such similarities in life circumstances and reasons given for dropping out between age groups were curious findings. According to the commonly accepted norms of growth and development that have prevailed in Western culture, time limits are assigned to human stages, and the personal circumstances of an individual's life are related to age (Montagu, 1989). However, recent research challenges these long accepted assumptions. Until the mid-1970s, people accepted and practiced cultural norms that prescribed education, courtship, and marriage in orderly stages. Recent social changes resulting from increased social diversity (race, socioeconomic class, culture, gender, academic preparation, family stability, sexual orientation, mental/physical health, etc.) are challenging the idea that adult experience can be categorized into systematic stages. People are no longer expected to march through life, making changes corresponding to an innate timetable (Tavris, 1989). "No one is doing things on time anymore. Our lives are much too irregular and unpredictable," says Nancy Schlossberg (1989, p. 51).

Our expectation that people grow out of stages of development at predetermined ages may hinder effective advising of nontraditional and traditional students. Some of the dilemmas resulting in students' withdrawals from the university may be averted if the institution provides immediate and

specific advising for these students commensurate with their psychosocial developmental levels (Chickering, 1972, 1981; Ivey, 1991).

Two Theories of Adult Development

Researchers have not been able to agree on the nature and causality of change or growth during the human life span. *Deterministic* theories suggest that development is characterized by predictable, ordered, sequential changes at various ages and stages (Erikson, 1959; Gould, 1978; Levinson, Darrow, Klein, Levinson & McKee, 1978; Sheehy, 1976). In contrast, the perspective of *dialectical indeterminism* stresses personal goals, cultural norms, life experiences, marker events, and even chance as more influential than a deterministic patterning in an adult's development (Bar-Yam, 1991; Gergen, 1980; Hedlund & Ebersole, 1983; Riegal, 1979; Tavris, 1992).

Both older, nontraditional freshman students and younger, traditional freshman students are at a transition point in their lives, characterized by apprehension and uncertainty. Though demographic characteristics obviously differ, if research findings are accurate that adults of all ages struggle with similar questions and feelings, the initial attitudes and needs of newly entering traditional freshman and nontraditional freshman students may be very much the same (Johnson, Wallace & Sedlacek, 1979; Slaney, 1986; Steltonpohl & Shipton, 1986). In this time of instability, older students often seem to "lose" their "adult selves" and regress to cognitions and feelings typical of an earlier period in their lives, functioning at psychosocial developmental levels that resemble those of traditional students (Ivey, 1991). As researchers cannot agree on causes, sequences, and expectations for growth in adults, education professionals cannot concur on the treatment of adult students. Many educators treat adults as if they have reached closure in their psychosocial development. However, existential questions about identity, meaning, purpose, vocation, social responsibility, dependence, and interpersonal relationships that challenge adolescents never end and in fact, continue to challenge parents and grandparents (Chickering & Havighurst, 1981; Douvan, 1981).

Developmental Tasks

The *developmental task* is a common feature in most theories of adult development. A developmental task involves vital intellectual, social, cultural, or interpersonal aspects of the individual's maturation (Chickering & Havighurst, 1981). Such a task stimulates the person to progress to a level of functioning just beyond the current developmental level, and intellectual and psychological growth is advanced. An individual who has not experienced developmental tasks similar to those of another will not have reached a comparable developmental level, even though he or she may have reached a comparable age. Thus, older freshman students who have not experienced the developmental tasks related to higher education may be functioning on a developmental level akin to that of students who are facing similar developmental tasks at a much younger age.

In developing effective interventions for nontraditional freshman students, an advisor should be trained to respond to a student's "here and now" level of psychosocial development. Such knowledge is vital in helping the student acclimate to and choose to remain in the university experience.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to determine whether differences on psychosocial variables might explain the larger attrition rate of nontraditional students compared to traditional students. To explore and develop appropriate advising for freshman students, this study compared psychosocial developmental levels of first-entry traditional freshman students with psychosocial developmental levels of first-entry nontraditional freshman students upon initial entry into the university. If no differences exist, similar advising—as it addresses certain psychosocial factors—should suffice for both groups. Existing advising services may merely need to be adapted for individual student situations, and administrators will be able to allocate time and resources more effectively.

Methods

Population

Weber State University is an urban, commuter, state university with an enrollment of 14,500 students; 95% are from within the state. Approximately 43% of the total student body at Weber State University are 23 years of age or older; the majority of these older students are reentry students who are attending the university for career training. Fifty percent of the student body are female, 6% are minority students, 40% work part-time, and 96% are commuters.

The population from which the sample was selected consisted of 2,600 Weber State University first-entry freshmen, including 2,295 traditional age and 305 nontraditional age students, who were accepted for 1991 autumn quarter course work. The

purpose of this study was to compare students who had no prior university experience. Twelve percent of the incoming freshmen who met that criterion were nontraditional students. By definition, at Weber State University, the cutoff between the traditional age and the nontraditional age student is 23.

All first-entry freshman students are required to attend a standardized new-student orientation session before the autumn quarter begins. Freshman students of any age who do not attend orientation cannot register for their academic courses. *Re-entry students are waived from this requirement.* Each session has the capacity to serve approximately 50 students. Ten sessions were selected (approximately two per month) at random from the orientation date pool. The research questionnaires were administered to all traditional and nontraditional students in attendance.

Sample

Three hundred eighty-nine traditional freshman students were tested: 172 were male, 217 were female; 15 were married, 374 were single. The mean age of these students was 18 (SD = 1.2); the oldest was 22 and the youngest was 16. Only 15 students in the sample were 22 years old.

One hundred fifteen nontraditional first-entry freshman students were also tested: 46 were male, 69 were female; 54 were married, 61 were single. The mean age of this group was 30 (SD = 7.1), with the oldest being 53 and the youngest 23. Only 11 of the students in this group were 23. Three of these students were between the ages of 50 and 59, 14 were between the ages of 40 and 49, 80 were between the ages of 30 and 39, and 7 were between the ages of 24 and 29.

Instruments

All participating students were asked to complete the Student Developmental Task and Lifestyle Inventory (SDTLI) (Winston and Miller, 1987) and the Developmental Advising Inventory (DAI) (Dickson, 1989). Both are instruments designed to measure facets of Chickering's theory of psychosocial development of college students. The SDTLI assesses developmental tasks in traditional age students; the DAI can be administered to traditional and nontraditional age students (Dickson, 1989, p. 54).

Three SDTLI developmental task scales were analyzed for this study: the Establishing and Clarifying Purpose (PUR) task, the Developing Mature Interpersonal Relationships (MIR) task, and the Academic Autonomy (AA) task. Maximum scores on the tasks are 68, 33, and 19 respectively. Coefficient Alpha (N = 954) for the total inventory has been found to be 0.93. Winston and Miller (1987) reported studies comparing the SDTLI to instruments judged to be conceptually related and established adequate validity for the SDTLI.

The DAI (Dickson, 1989) represents the major developmental tasks in a wellness model with nine dimensions: Intellectual, Life Planning, Social, Physical, Emotional, Sexual, Cultural, Spiritual, and Political. Students make choices on 135 value-based items which assess the status of developmental tasks for a particular period of their lives. The maximum score for each dimension is 60. Reliability estimates for the dimensions range from a low of 0.82 (Intellectual) to a high of 0.87 (Political, Cultural and Spiritual). Four basic approaches were used to establish content validity of the items: developmental theory, feedback from students, expert evaluators, and response distributions (Dickson, 1989). The nine-dimension model offered defensible content and construct validity (Dickson, 1989). Descriptions of the three tasks on the SDTLI and the nine dimensions on the DAI are provided in Table 1.

Procedures

The orientation coordinator from Weber State University Academic Advisement Center administered the SDTLI and the DAI during the first 1.5 hour of the selected orientation sessions to all attending students according to standardized instructions. Students were advised that their participation was voluntary, and that the information gathered would be used anonymously for research purposes.

Statistical Methods

A block design was used in this research. Marital status and gender were analyzed as blocking variables along with the independent variable *age* (traditional and nontraditional) in order to test for interactions among these variables. Because marital status and gender added to the heterogeneity of the subjects, blocking on these two variables also reduced error variance; it is not appropriate to interpret the blocking factors as main effects (Ostle & Malone, 1988). The distinction between "traditional" and "nontraditional" students was set at age 23. Though we recognized that 22 and 23 year olds do not vary greatly, we dichotomized the groups at these ages because this is policy at Weber State University. We analyzed the data multivariately (MANOVA) to allow for the multivariate response set (Bray & Maxwell, 1985). Although it is ideal to have equal

Table 1
Tasks and Dimensions on the SDTLI and the DAI

From the SDTLI:
Establishing and Clarifying Purpose Task: Ability to define one's educational goals, to assess and balance one's interests, aptitudes, or personality traits relative to the world of work.
Developing Mature Interpersonal Relationships Task: Ability to develop independent, honest, trusting relationships, and to appreciate interpersonal differences.
Academic Autonomy Task: Capacity to monitor one's own behavior and schedule time for study, in order to scholastically perform commensurate with one's perceived abilities.
From the DAI:
Intellectual Dimension: Skills in critical thinking and learning; the ability to seek knowledge to improve the quality of life.
Life Planning Dimension: Choices involving lifestyle and career.
Social Dimension: Ability to develop friendships and intimacy.
Physical Dimension: Knowledge and wise practice of nutrition, exercise, rest, and health care.
Emotional Dimension: Capacity to develop emotional automonomy (freedom from pressing needs for approval in order to endorse important beliefs) and to constructively create psychological energy.
Sexual Dimension: Condition of mature sexuality, including recognition of the presence or absence of gender stereotyping.
Cultural Dimension: Appreciation of varied aesthetics and toleration of diversity.
Spiritual Dimension: Development and integration of values.
Political Dimension: Understanding of personal rights and responsibilities at both the local and national levels.

numbers in each group, unequal numbers may be used to calculate this statistic (Ostle & Malone, 1988).

Upon the MANOVA significant values, univariate analyses of variance were computed to determine which tasks and dimensions attained significance in separating the groups. The dependent variables were the scores on the three tasks of the SDTLI and the scores on the nine dimensions of the DAI, as shown in Table 1.

Results

Age Group Effects

The MANOVA computed on the scores of the two instruments indicated a statistically significant difference between the traditional and nontraditional groups, as illustrated in Table 2. To ascertain direction and magnitude of the age group differences, ANOVAs were computed on each of the 12 dependent variables. A significant difference between groups was found only on the Developing Mature Interpersonal Relationships Task on the SDTLI, with a p value of 0.004 (see Table 3 for test results); the nontraditional student mean was higher than the traditional student mean on this task (nontraditional: mean = 20.58, SD = 5.05; traditional: mean = 17.37, SD = 4.97). Analyses of the other 11 dependent variables indicated no significant differences in responses of traditional and nontraditional age students.

Interaction Effects

The results of the MANOVA indicated no significant interaction effects among gender, marital status and age as shown in Table 2. Therefore, it was inappropriate to compute individual ANOVAs on the interaction data (Bray & Maxwell, 1985).

Discussion

Age Group Effects

The finding of no significant differences in the developmental levels of traditional freshman students (17–22 years of age) and nontraditional freshman students (≥ 23 years) on 11 of the 12 dependent variables is consistent with the model of dialectical indeterminism in adult development. As entering freshmen, none of the individuals participating in this study had prior experience with the environment of higher education regardless of age; consequently they were facing the changes and challenges imposed by entering the university on comparable developmental levels in areas related to functioning as university students. Similarity in functioning on many related developmental tasks and characteristics may be assumed.

The scores of emotional autonomy and identity tasks (on emotional and life planning dimensions of DAI) suggest that similarities may occur in students of varying ages and prior experiences:

1. Students transferring from high school to college must relinquish a dependency identity on family, which expedites their move toward emotional autonomy.

2. Many women entering the university after years in homemaking and parenting roles seem to acquire an emotional autonomy apart from their families. They seek a new identity to supplement or replace the role previously appointed to them by cultural norms (Caplan, 1989; Douvan, 1981; Tavris, 1992).

3. Many men who enter college at a nontraditional age may have validated their identity and autonomy through years spent in the work force; however, the regressive position that implies compliance, and suggests submission of self to the evaluation of an academic grade-dispensing professor, may result in a loss of a work identity and an unsettling drive to maintain emotional autonomy (Douvan, 1981).

Though the motivations may be rooted in different cultural norms, the drives and needs of these dissimilar students appear strikingly similar, consistent with Riegal's (1979) and Gergen's (1980) theories that individuals cycle through developmental tasks at different levels of complexity, depending on circumstances, challenges, and cultural influences.

The only significant difference of older and younger students was found on the task of Developing Mature Interpersonal Relationships (MIR), a finding that corresponds with Torbert's (1981) assertion that interpersonal competence is a practical ability, and may "have an anti-intellectual orientation" (p. 173). Apparently, achieving developmental growth in interpersonal relationships does not require university attendance; student competence in this area has obviously developed through other life experiences.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Although additional empirical support is needed, this research is consistent with the proposition by Schlossberg et al. (1989), Ivey (1991), and Tavris (1989) that human development does not occur on the same chronological time line for all individuals, and is thus not determined in age and stage order.

Table 2
Multivariate Analysis of Variance (N=504)

Source		Wilks' Lambda	DF	F	*p*-Value
Age		.96	12	1.81	.0440*
Gender	(block)	.95	12	2.13	
Marital Status	(block)	.96	12	1.80	
Age X Gender		.97	12	1.28	.2253
Age X Marital Status		.98	12	0.86	.5831
Gender X Marital Status		.96	12	1.58	.0934
Age X Gender X Marital Status		.96	12	1.58	.0995
Error			477		

*$p<.05$

Table 3
Results of ANOVAs on 12 Dependent Variables Concerning Age Differences

Variable	Source	DF	MS	F	p Val
Establishing & Clarifying Purpose Task	Age	1	45.86	0.84	.542
Developing Mature Interpersonal Relationships Task	Age	1	196.07	8.43	.004*
Academic Autonomy Task	Age	1	15.96	2.45	.118
Intellectual Dimension	Age	1	2.71	0.11	.742
Life Planning Dimension	Age	1	9.46	0.29	.588
Social Dimension	Age	1	91.40	2.80	.095
Physical Dimension	Age	1	22.54	0.54	.463
Emotional Dimension	Age	1	26.48	0.82	.364
Sexual Dimension	Age	1	104.63	3.13	.077
Cultural Dimension	Age	1	144.62	2.97	.085
Spiritual Dimension	Age	1	2.20	0.03	.853
Political Dimension	Age	1	51.11	0.99	.320

Degrees of Freedom = 488; Degrees of Error = 496; *p <.05

Moreover, transitions recur throughout life; growth relative to psychosocial task development never achieves closure. Accordingly, advisors need to overcome the tendency to consider older adults as prepared and astute, needing little guidance from others. Many nontraditional age freshman students, as suggested by this study, experience the same insecurities about their intellectual and life planning capabilities as younger students. A careful assessment of students' support needs should occur during the critical first quarter (ideally during the first 3 weeks) when the threat of dropping out is most likely. They must have the opportunity to discuss their concerns with an advisor well-trained in differential adult development theory and transition-related stress. These older students should be encouraged to take advantage of a broad range of services that are designed to build self-esteem and to develop life-planning skills such as decision making and goal setting.

In regard to help with students' personal circumstances, advisors should be knowledgeable about campus agencies that provide child care, financial aid, psychological counseling, and support groups for spouses and families of students. The existing services and opportunities offered by higher education should be made available for older students at convenient, extended-hour times. Every possible effort must be made to promote the success of this group of nontraditional learners.

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