

“Anyone like me?”

Identity and Social Media Among Nontraditional-Age Community College Students

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GETTING CONNECTED: HARNESSING THE POWER OF SOCIAL MEDIA
TO ENHANCE COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENT SUCCESS

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Report Contents

Executive Summary	3
Introduction.....	6
Who are nontraditional students?.....	8
Prior Research	9
<i>Persistence of nontraditional students</i>	9
<i>Student identity</i>	9
<i>Nontraditional student identity</i>	9
<i>Nontraditional student identity and persistence</i>	11
The possibilities of social media for nontraditional students	12
<i>The connection between social media and grade point average</i>	12
<i>The connection between social media and persistence</i>	14
<i>Insights from the qualitative analysis</i>	14
Data	16
Findings.....	17
<i>Word frequency</i>	17
<i>Format and themes of interactions</i>	18
Discussion.....	23
Conclusion.....	26

Executive Summary

If given the opportunity, how might community college students choose to use a mobile/web-based social media platform to engage in college and strategize success? The study, *Getting Connected: Harnessing the Power of Social Media to Enhance Community College Student Success*, examined how 9 community colleges across 8 states implemented such a platform – Uversity’s *Schools App* – to enable students to build a virtual community by connecting with each other and with their college. *Schools App* provided a social media space internal to each community college, open for invited students, staff, faculty, and administrators to use as they wished.

The overall *Getting Connected* study examined whether or not use of such social media could improve success outcomes. Findings showed students who joined and used *Schools App* had higher GPAs and rates of continued enrollment than those who did not (Fagioli, Rios-Aguilar & Deil-Amen, 2016; Rios-Aguilar & Deil-Amen, 2014). There were, however, other purposes of the project, including discovering if and exactly how students interacted in an effort to connect with others, to seek belonging, and to create community.

We found that students used *Schools App* for procedural and academic rather than for social purposes. Even though the app was designed to be more of a social space, students used it predominantly to seek help from one another regarding financial aid, enrollment and course-taking, book buying and selling, to seek guidance on academic class and instructor choices, and to find information on degree and major requirements from others pursuing the same majors. Overall, only a small proportion of interactions on the app involved social identities or social and political issues.

Interestingly, however, the returning adult students of nontraditional age emerged as a unique set of users. Their use of the social media space differed from the other students. In particular, their posts tended to be of a more personal nature, exposing their emotions and vulnerabilities. These older students tended to identify by age and life stage and define themselves as different than other students. They used the app to seek connection with others similar to themselves and to offer guidance to others in similar circumstances. In fact, age, or returning adult status, was the only social identity consistently and explicitly noted on the app across all nine colleges. Posts regarding this topic tended to receive the most comments from the greatest diversity of other students.



The remainder of this report addresses the following topics:

- **Who are nontraditional students?**
 - ◆ Nontraditional students are generally defined as 25 years old and older.
 - ◆ Adult students often have multiple identities: employees, parents or caregivers, spouses or partners, and students.
 - ◆ Adult students (25 and above) comprise 40% of students at community colleges (compared to 21% at public and private [non-profit] four-year universities)
- **Persistence of nontraditional students**
 - ◆ Early researchers believed that unlike younger students, older students’ work and family obligations negatively affected persistence, while later scholars found that it had a positive effect.
 - ◆ Early researchers believed social integration was not important for nontraditional students; later researchers found that it was.
 - ◆ Little research has tested whether student identity could affect persistence.
- **Nontraditional student identity**
 - ◆ Most researchers have assumed that students’ primary identity was that of a student, and that to be successful, they had to fit their *lives* into *college*.
 - ◆ Our findings indicate that the opposite may be happening: older students’ primary identity is not that of a student and that they are instead fitting *college* into their *lives*.
 - ◆ The way older students fit college into their lives is by adding a student identity to their existing repertoire of identities of worker, spouse or partner, and parent or caregiver.
 - ◆ Little research has examined the role of student identity in persistence.
- **The possibilities of social media for nontraditional students**
 - ◆ Nontraditional-age students who are members of the *Schools App* have higher GPAs and greater persistence than peers who are non-members.
 - ◆ Being members of *Schools App* makes a greater difference for older students than for younger students in terms of persistence in college.
 - ◆ Social media provides busy adult students an *engagement* tool for bonding with others who share their nontraditional identity. Students seek and offer social and academic support that they may not be able to easily obtain through on-campus tools more accessible to traditional students.
 - ◆ The app also acts as a *research* tool that enables firsthand observation of students’ real-time construction of college-going strategies.
- **Data**
 - ◆ Across seven campuses in the study with complete data, there were 6,568 nontraditional-age (25 years and older) members of *Schools App*, including 1,644 active users and 3,697 passive users.

- **Findings**
 - ◆ Older students frequently used vocabulary on the app that expressed their life stage (“back,” “years,” “older”) and multiple identities (“job,” “work,” “kids”).
 - ◆ Nontraditional students also expressed emotion on the app toward school (“feel,” “love,” “excited,” “nervous,” “awkward”) and gratitude for the support of other similar students (“help,” “helpful,” and “thanks”).
 - ◆ Adult students interacted in an inquiry and response format by asking a question or making a declaration that provoked a supportive response from others who share their identity. Inquiries clustered around five issues:
 - ▶ Older students expressed doubt about their academic ability.
 - ▶ Nontraditional students asked whether there were others who shared their identities.
 - ▶ Despite comprising about 44% of the student bodies of the colleges in the study, adult students questioned whether they belonged in a college that they perceived as existing for younger students.
 - ▶ Adult students expressed the liabilities as well as the assets of being an older student enrolled in higher education.
 - ◆ When nontraditional students expressed these concerns, other nontraditional student peers responded on the app by
 - ▶ identifying themselves by age, job status, number of children, and marital status
 - ▶ offering reassurance, information, and suggestions for success
 - ▶ sharing their own experiences
 - ▶ affirming that the student was not alone and could succeed
- **Discussion**
 - ◆ Adult students asked for support on an emotional and practical level and received it from other adult students.
 - ◆ Nontraditional students used the social media space to seek out those who shared their multiple identities. Connecting with other older students appeared to provide them with a positive feeling and a sense of belonging.
 - ◆ Many nontraditional students did not see being a student as their primary identity.
 - ◆ Work and family can potentially positively affect college success by providing skills and motivation.
 - ◆ Nontraditional students articulated the liabilities of their life stage, notably the challenge of scheduling classes and study time around their children.
 - ◆ Male adult students shared feelings of fear as they reentered college, which had previously been noted only in females.
 - ◆ Social integration appears important for nontraditional student persistence but should be defined in nontraditional ways
- **Conclusion**
 - ◆ Social media can be part of the solution to the challenge of connecting older students to their two-year institutions. It can be both an engagement tool and a research tool.
 - ◆ Community colleges would be well advised to continue to experiment with ways to harness the power of social media, as well as other strategies, to enhance the success of adult students.

Introduction

Any effort to increase the engagement and persistence of community college students must take into account the unique needs of nontraditional-age students. It is critical to understand adult students first, because they have become a huge share of enrolled college students and second, because their unique life stage requires a distinct process of engagement. Can social media be a legitimate space for adult students to engage in their college community? If so, what would that engagement look like? Findings from our study address these issues. This report describes who nontraditional students are, examines issues around their persistence and identity, and then details the findings of the study

Our research was based on a specific social media tool, *Schools App*, by Uversity. This is a Facebook-based application that can only be accessed by a college's students and staff. As part of the grant, *Schools App* was subsidized and implemented at nine different community colleges in eight states across the country from every geographic region, representing urban, suburban, and rural contexts. Students were allowed to post whatever they wanted (with the exception of security threats or vulgarity) to the *Schools App* school feed (similar to Facebook's news feed) creating a space where students could express ideas, concerns, or questions of their choosing. The app enabled students to build a virtual community by connecting with each other and with their college. 92,000 posts were made from September 2011 through June of 2014.

We found that generally, students used the app for procedural and academic rather than for social purposes. Although the app was designed to be more of a social space, students instead used it predominantly to seek help from one another regarding financial aid, enrollment and course-taking, book buying and selling, to

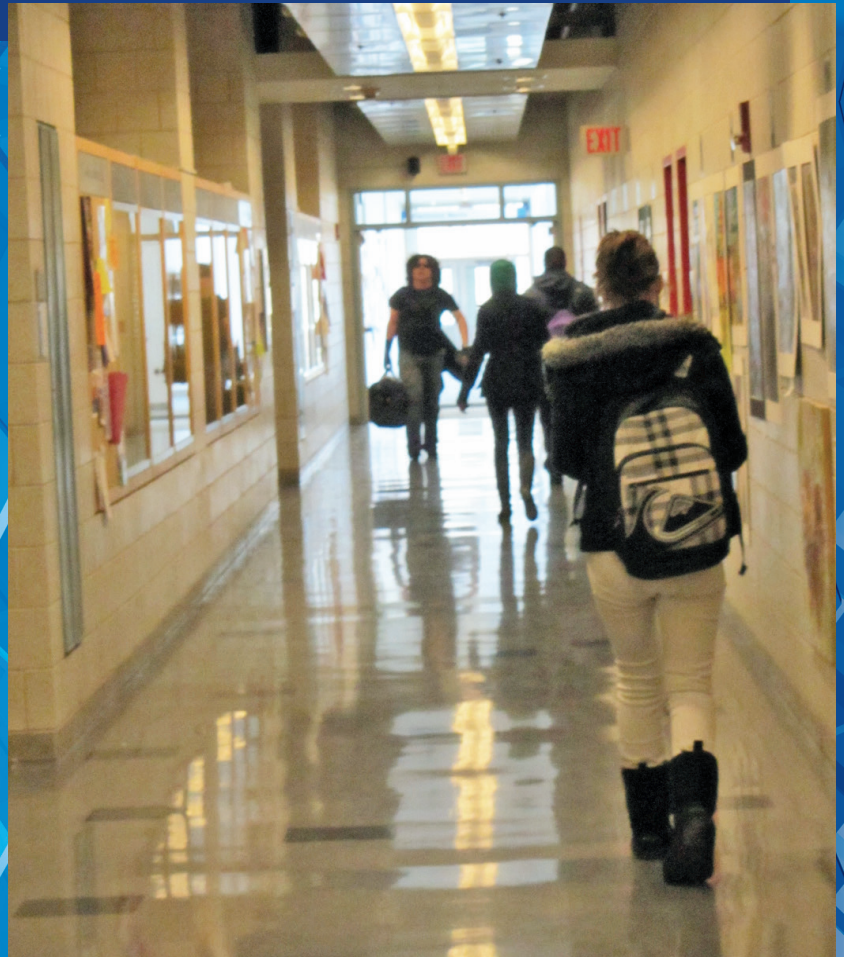
seek guidance on academic class and instructor choices, and to find information on degree and major requirements from others pursuing the same majors. To a lesser extent, students used the app to generate involvement in student organizations and activities. However, on the whole, few interactions on the app involved social identities or social and political issues.

Interestingly, the returning adult students of nontraditional age emerged as a unique set of users. Their use of the social media space differed from the other students. In particular, their posts tended to be of a more personal nature, exposing their emotions and vulnerabilities. These older students tended to identify by age and life stage and define themselves as different than other students. They used the app to seek connection with others similar to themselves and to offer guidance to others in similar circumstances. In fact, age, or returning adult status, was the only social identity consistently and explicitly noted on the app. Posts regarding this topic tended to receive the most comments from the greatest diversity of other students. In addition, the posts relating to this topic also often overlapped with the topic of major/career aspirations, further enhancing the encouraging and advice-giving nature of these exchanges.



"Anyone like me?" Identity and Social Media Among Nontraditional-Age Community College Students

INSTITUTION	STATE	ENROLLMENT	LOCATION
Los Angeles Trade & Tech College	California	15,734	City Large
Northwest Arkansas Community College	Arkansas	8,365	City Small
Cuyahoga Community College	Ohio	31,250	City Large
Phoenix College	Arizona	13,000	City Large
Chandler-Gilbert Community College	Arizona	12,296	Suburban Large
Onondaga Community College	New York	11,783	Suburban Large
San Jacinto College	Texas	28,549	City Large
Western Technical College	Wisconsin	5,573	Rural Medium
Laramie County Community College	Wyoming	4,905	Rural Medium



Who are nontraditional students?

In the United States, adult students (25 and older) comprise 40% of students at community colleges, compared to only 21% at four-year universities (public and private, non-profit) (Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System [IPEDS], 2012). In aggregate, students in the nine community colleges in our study had an average age of 25.5 and 36% were nontraditional-aged (25 and older). In this study we also refer to nontraditional students as older, adult, and returning adult students.

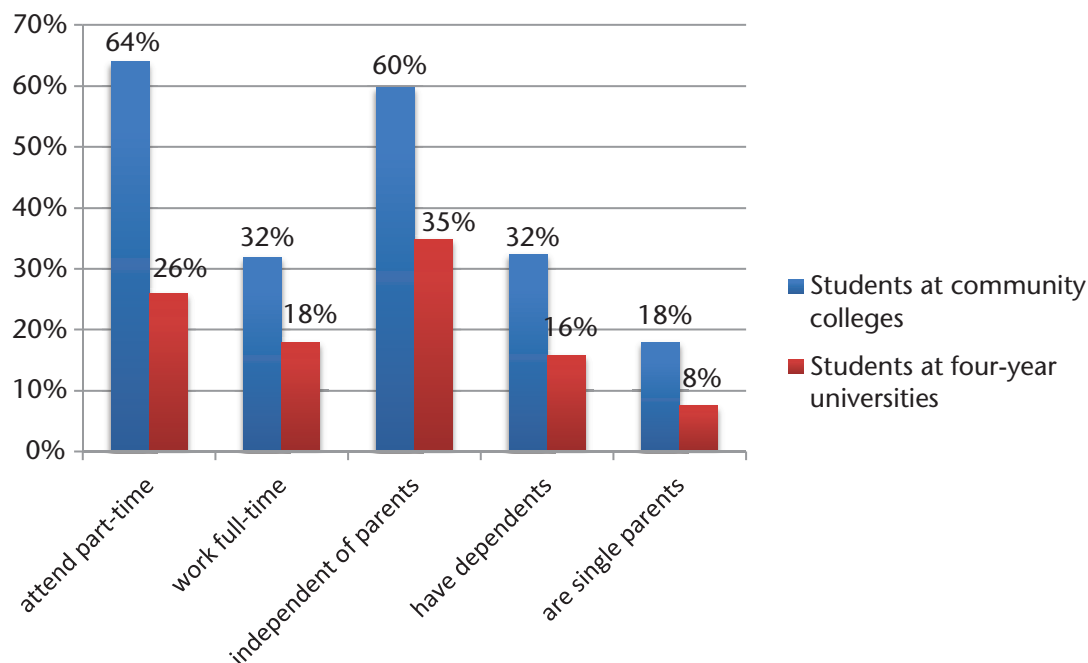
Nontraditional-age college students are commonly defined as those 25 years and older (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Metzner & Bean, 1987). These adult students also experience delayed enrollment (not matriculating into college immediately after high school graduation), and tend to have independent financial status, attend college part-time, work full-time, have a spouse and/or children (or other dependents

beyond a spouse), be single parents, or not have completed a traditional high school diploma (Choy, 2002; Horn & Carroll, 1996). Because they have at least one of these characteristics, 73% of U.S. college students are at least in part nontraditional (OERI, 2002), although only 40% are 25 and older (IPEDS, 2012).

Community college students exhibit nontraditional student indicators at rates that are 1.5 to two times greater than students at four-year universities (public and private non-profit), as seen in the bar graph below. More than 60% of students at two-year public colleges attend part-time and are independent of their parents. More than a third work full-time and have dependents. And 18% are single parents. In contrast, the rates of students in four-year universities (public and private non-profit) are one half to two thirds the levels of community college students (Skomsvold, 2014).

Selected non-traditional student indicators

(Source: Skomsvold, 2014)



Prior research

Persistence of nontraditional students.

The persistence of adult students depends on factors that are distinct from those influencing the retention of younger students (Balkcum, 2014; Bean & Metzner, 1985; Harris Duggan & Crawford Sorey, 2008; Laing & Robinson, 2003; Olson, 2009). External factors such as work, family, and community play greater roles in the lives of nontraditional-age students. Scholars have developed distinct models of nontraditional student engagement, which give greater weight to external factors. These models almost universally assert that social integration does not affect nontraditional student persistence (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Chartrand, 1992; Craig & Ward, 2007; Farabaugh-Dorkins, 1991; Stahl & Pavel, 1992). We were only able to identify one researcher that tested social integration for nontraditional students (Henningesen, 2003), and that study found social integration to be significant for nontraditional student persistence.

Although nontraditional students comprise a huge portion of community college students, the tools which institutions rely on to retain students are often built on theories developed to assist traditional-age students (Tinto, 1975; Tinto, 1988; Tinto, 1993). These approaches emphasize “learning communities” of students formed on campus and make use of students living in campus residence halls. Yet theories and methods designed to aid younger students to persist in college may be less effective with older students who have multiple responsibilities outside the campus.

Theories which were developed to explain nontraditional student persistence are also flawed because most researchers have not even tested the effect of social integration since it has generally been regarded as unimportant in light of their family and work responsibilities. Social integration may take a different form for older students than for younger students, but

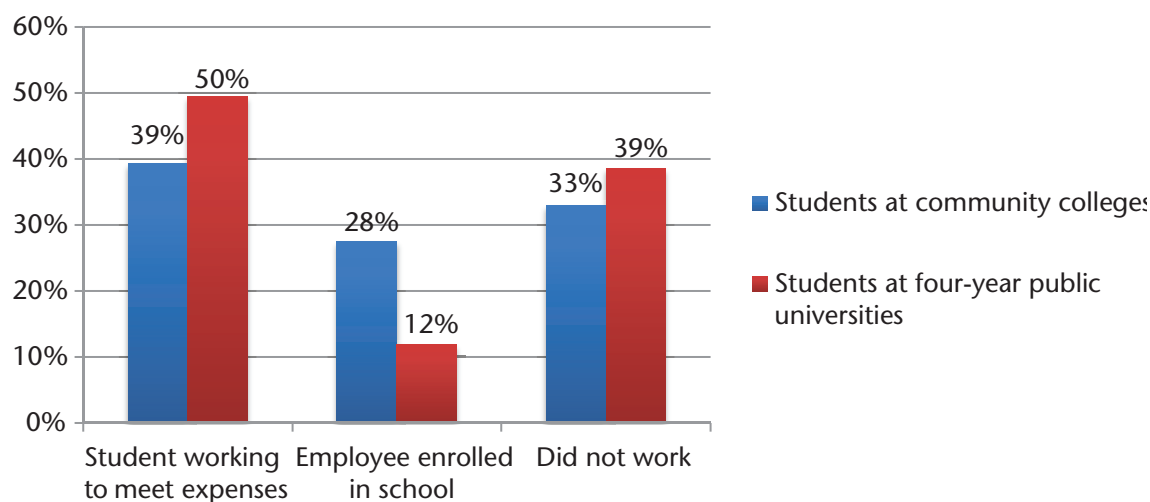
when tested has been shown to be significant nonetheless (Henningesen, 2003). For community college students, a fusion of both social and academic integration has been shown to be critical for persistence and experiences where this happens have been referred to as socio-academic integrative moments (Deil-Amen, 2011).

Student identity. Before we examine the identity of nontraditional students, we consider the concept of student identity. Student identity is rooted in theories of social identity, in which identity is broadly defined as being a member of a group or groups (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Bartel, 2001; Brewer, 1991; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). An individual may feel marginalized because of a personal characteristic, such as nontraditional status, but becoming a member of a group can “convert the stigma from a feature of personal identity to a basis of social identity” (Brewer, 1991, p. 481). Social groups cultivate a sense in their members that the group is unique and in a way that members are proud of (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), especially when they compare their group to others (Bartel, 2001). So when a person becomes a group member, two needs are met at the same time: distinctiveness and belonging (Brewer, 1991). No studies were found which examined identity formation by nontraditional students becoming part of a group (in person or virtual) with others who share their identity.

Nontraditional student identity. Community college students are not only distinct in terms of nontraditional characteristics; they also define themselves quite differently. The share of students attending community college who see their identity as “employees who study” rather than “students who work” is double that of students four-year universities (Skomsvold, 2014, p. 130), as can be seen on the following bar graph. The majority of students who see themselves as “employees who study” also work full-time, attend college part-time, are married, and have

Student identity: Student who works or worker who studies?

(Source: Skomsvold, 2014, p. 130)



dependents (Berker, Horn, & Carroll, 2003, p. vi and p. 12). This is completely different from the modal student at a four-year university (public and private non-profit) who is under 25, a full-time student, not a full-time worker, unmarried, and without dependents (Berker et al.). As a result of their commitments beyond school, nontraditional students at community colleges are less likely to have time to engage with the institution through on-campus experiences.

Few researchers have examined the nature of nontraditional student identity, but the few who have proposed that nontraditional students construct their own identity based on validation in their various life roles in their family, workplace, and college. Most higher education research on student identity has examined identities based on race, ethnicity, sexuality, social class, culture, and religion in younger, traditional-age students. (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007; Jones & McEwen, 2000; Prentice & Yopyk, 2005; Torres, Jones, &

Renn, 2009; Scanlon, Rowling, & Weber, 2007). Yet, recent book edited by Perna (2010) includes the work of multiple authors who specifically examines the identity of nontraditional students. This work proposes that adult students construct their own identities based on their life experiences, especially those at work. The authors, notably Kasworm (2010b), suggest that adult students' identities are based more on their performance in various social roles than on their internal state of mind. Therefore, adult students view school, and its usefulness in their lives, through the lens of their role as workers. They draw on work experiences to continuously construct new knowledge that is practical to them. Nontraditional students also construct their identities based on their various roles in their families, workplaces, and communities, and colleges. Adult students build their student role as they are validated by faculty (or not), as they relate to other students, and as they compare themselves to their own image of the ideal student.

Both Tinto’s (1975, 1988, 1993) integration theory as well as the theories of nontraditional student persistence described above share an assumption that students must fit their *lives* into *college*. Rarely has research examined the inverse: students fitting *college* into their *lives*. Perhaps, we argue, there is an identity not proposed by other researchers: a student identity which is *not centered on being a student*.

Nontraditional student identity and persistence. Furthermore, could a nontraditional student’s identity as a college student be a critical component of their ability to persist in college? There has been little research examining how nontraditional-age students strategize college success, given their heavy family and work responsibilities. And the theories and frameworks that do exist do not incorporate identity as a critical component.

In our study we explore how nontraditional students use social media, and we consider if and how identity formation, building, or reinforcement appear in their online interactions. By examining the content of their exchanges, we observe, through their eyes, what concerns them most and how they experience their student identity. By doing this, we feel we have gathered clues to better understand what factors to consider in addressing the factors that may influence the persistence of these students. In other words, we utilize social media as a tool to uncover exactly how nontraditional students are using it as a tool to support their own college-going. By doing this, we were able to collect and analyze real-time data about what it meant for them to be nontraditional students and what they felt they needed, lacked, sought to acquire, or could contribute as students of this kind in their attempts to succeed in college.



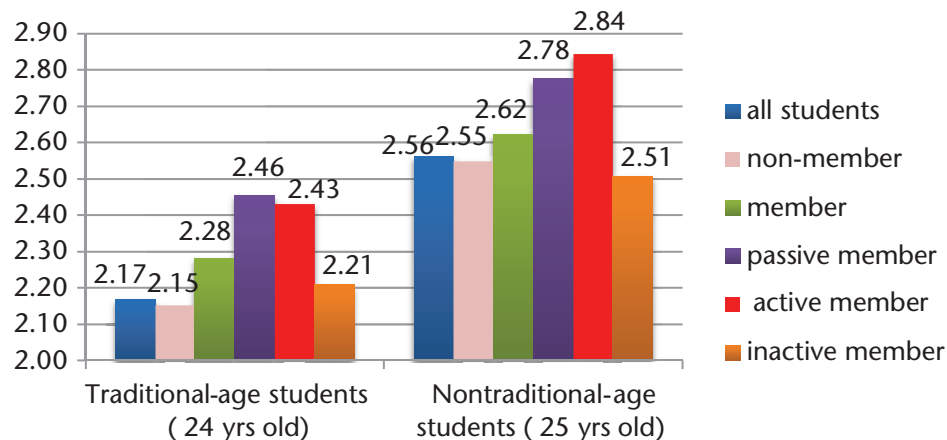
The possibilities of social media for nontraditional students

Virtual communities, such as a group of nontraditional students interacting on the *Schools App*, can fulfill the functions of belonging much as membership in face-to-face groups do by providing for mutual encouragement and help (Blanchard & Markus, 2004; Chiu, Hsu, & Wang, 2006; Wang, Yu, & Fesenmaier, 2002). Also the order at the bottom line of the same column: (Cheung, Chiu, & Lee, 2011; Chiu et al., 2006; Zhao, Lu, Wang, Chau, & Zhang, 2012). One leading researcher defined online community as "people who interact as they strive to satisfy their own needs or perform special roles; a shared purpose such as an interest, need, information exchange, or service that provides a reason for the community; policies that guide people's interactions; and computer systems which support and mediate social interaction and facilitate a sense of togetherness" (Preece, 2000). Members of the online community, participate more (posting more on Facebook, for example) and feel a sense of belonging when they share the

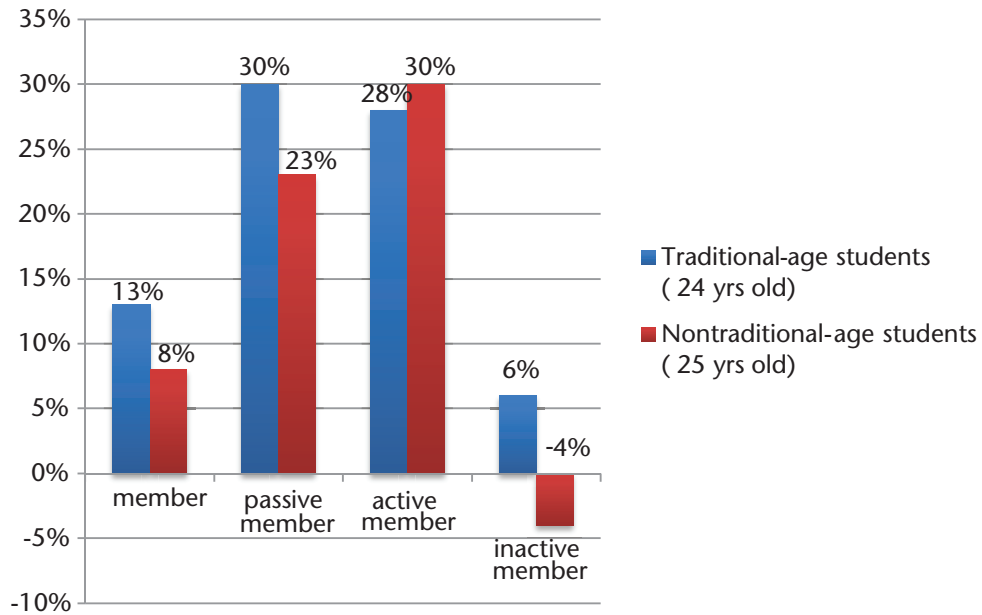
same identity as other group members (Cheung, Chiu, & Lee, 2011; Chiu et al., 2006; Zhao, Lu, Wang, Chau, & Zhang, 2012). A virtuous cycle is created as the online community validates members' social identities and they feel a further sense of belonging (Hughes, 2007).

The connection between social media and grade point average. Our analyses based on the *Getting Connected* study data reveal that in many respects, social media can be one of the tools that facilitates the integration and persistence of nontraditional students in community college. Findings indicate higher grade point average (GPA) for all students, including older students, who were active or passive members of the *Schools App* compared to students who were not members or were inactive members, as seen in the following bar graphs. Overall, with the exception of nontraditional-age inactive members, those who were members of *Schools App* had higher GPA's than nonmembers.

Mean grade point average (GPA) by app membership and age group



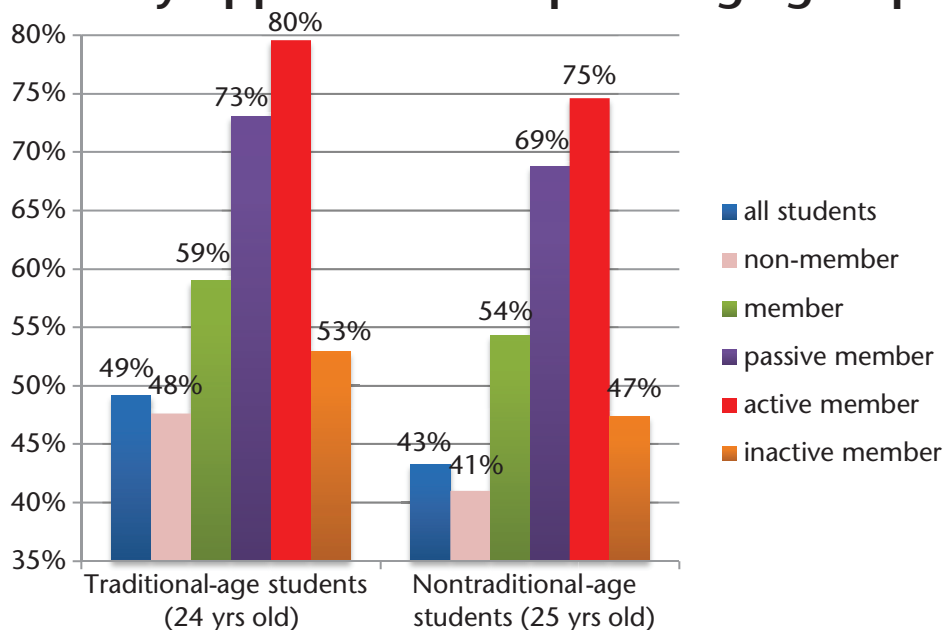
Mean grade point average (GPA) differences of app members compared to nonmembers, by age group



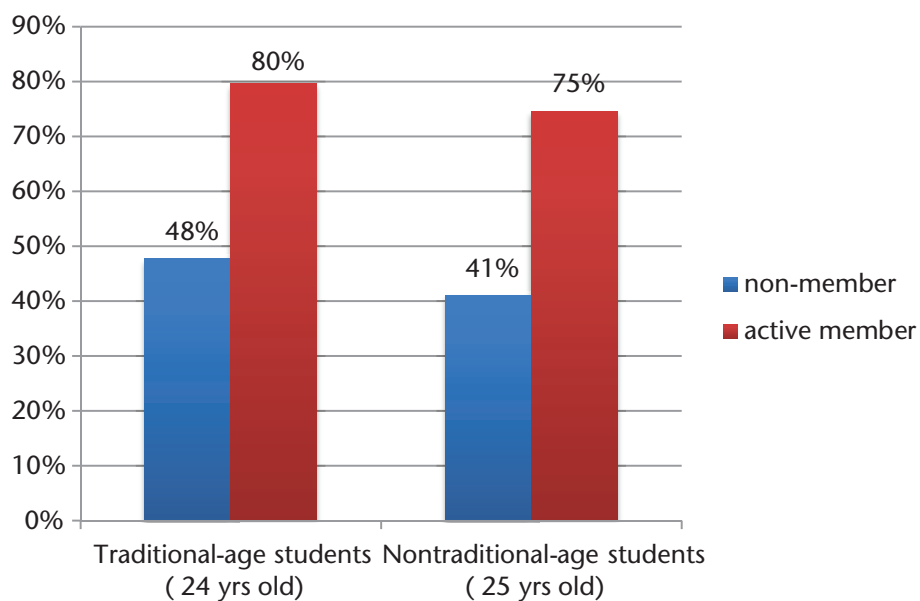
Schools App members also showed higher persistence rates compared to students who

were not members or inactive members, as seen in the following bar graph.

Mean persistence rates by app membership and age group



Mean persistence rate differences between non app members and active members, by age group



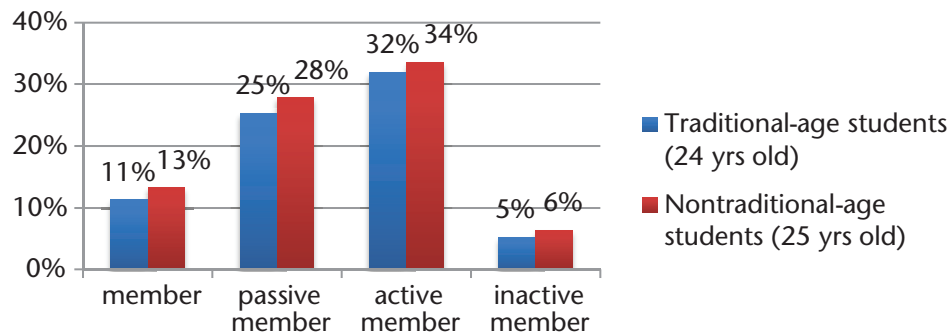
The connection between social media and persistence. Being an active app member appears to make a very large difference in persistence rates, as seen in the following bar graph. Among younger students, active users of the app averaged 80% persistence while non-app members averaged 48%, putting active users at a 67% higher rate of persistence than non-members. Adult student app users had an even greater advantage over their non-app using peers compared to the advantage traditional-age students had over their peers. Among older students, active users of the app averaged 75% persistence, while non-app members averaged 41%, giving active app users an 83% greater persistence rate over non-members.

Older app members of all types (active, passive, and inactive) enjoyed higher persistence rate advantages over non-app-user peers when compared to the advantage that younger app members had over their non-user peers, as seen

in the following bar graph. Adult students who were active app members persisted at a rate 34% above the rate of adult students who were not on the app. Traditional-age students who were active app members persisted at a 32% above the rate of younger students who were not on the app. A similar pattern, reflecting greater differentials for older students than for younger, was consistent for all types of app members. This may reflect a self-selection of adult students joining the app who have already determined to use any and every resource in order to persist. Conversely or perhaps simultaneously, it may reflect that social media may be more helpful for older students to feel connected to the college, since they may have less opportunity to spend time on campus or time to make social connections outside of class.

Insights from the qualitative analysis. The insights we gained from the quantitative analysis led us to further questions that can only be answered by qualitative inquiry. As we have

Mean persistence rate differences of app members compared to nonmembers, by age group



shown above, community college students who are active on *Schools App* have higher success outcomes, including persistence. It also appears that this higher likelihood of persistence is more pronounced for older community college students.

This information leads us to further questions: How might students who use social media be using it in a way that might result in greater persistence over nonusers? How do adult students use social media to enhance their attempts at persistence? What does our understanding of a potential link between social media use and persistence add to our prior understanding of adult community college students? How might *Schools App* users be leveraging social media to better integrate into college? To address these questions, an additional set of qualitative data was gathered. We observed student behaviors on the app and then interviewed them to see how this integration might be happening.

Studying qualitatively how older students actually use social media use has two benefits. First, providing students the social media app allowed students to experiment with a new tool they leverage in negotiating their path through college life. This paper examines how students do just that. Second, social media functions as a unique research tool that allows investigators

to directly observe students’ challenges as they state them for themselves, and this leads to a greater understanding of nontraditional student integration. Researchers are able to see not just what students *say* they do to connect to their college (self-reported data); instead they see what adult students *actually* do (researcher-observed data).

Studying nontraditional students as they utilize social media provides some of the first direct observations of both their behavior as adult learners and their continuous construction of identity. They reveal unique identity constructions in which school is viewed through the lens of work and in which interaction with others who are similar provides validation as a student. In the social media space, researchers can observe students seeking reassurance and validation in their new role as students (as distinct from their previous or other role as workers). Investigators can also observe older students in this vulnerable role of requesting valued college information.

In this study we will examine what is important for these older students. We will analyze the link between the app and integration and persistence. The theories of nontraditional student persistence have not examined the roles that social media or identity might play.

Data

The feed from the *Schools App* was used to collect student-authored posts and comments, which together constituted the app text. Across seven campuses in the study with complete data in *Schools App*, there were 6,568 nontraditional-age (25 years and older) members of the *Schools App*, including 1,644 active users and 3,697 passive users. This report focuses on those students who self-identified as older, not entering directly from high school, having children, and/or being financially independent of parents. The app text of these users was collected, coded, and analyzed. To determine topics most commonly discussed on the platform by nontraditional-age users, their app text was coded into one or more of 41 nodes using NVivo software. We carefully coded the text using a grounded approach according to its content and purpose. Specifically, the

posts including the words and concepts most frequently addressed by nontraditional-age users were analyzed for content as well. Our coding scheme also generated categories for how students were using the app – what role they were taking in their interactions with others. We called these categories “archetypes,” and 15 different archetypes evolved while coding to characterize these user types. Data were also collected from the interviews and focus groups of over 770 students and staff across the nine colleges in 2012 and five schools in Arizona, California, Ohio, Texas, and Wyoming in 2013. Interviews were coded using the same grounded approach described above, but the findings in this report detail the analyses for only the app text of nontraditional-age students.



INQUIRY

Inquiry via expression of anxiety
I am scared to return to school but I'm happy. I just pray in the end we ALL win!! (Robert)

RESPONSES

Inspiration, with spiritual language
We will, it's in the Plan! (Katherine)

Inspiration and practical information-sharing
You will do fine and when it comes to exams it helps to have a study group. I did that for math and I got an A in the class. (Donna)

Practical information-sharing
Hi Donna!! I didn't use the study group tool. I did use my tutors though. I received a B for the first time ever in my life. I will use the study group in addition to a tutor and see if I can get an A this time around for 0950 Math. (Althea)

Inspiration, with spiritual language
Hello Robert You should be happy. You are making a great positive change in your life with God/His Son's help. They put that get up and Go in You!! I know they put it in me. So heere I am and Here I Go!! (Althea)

Inspiration + practical information-sharing
Welcome back!!! You are going to do great!!! I'm with Alice...I find the tutoring center to be amazing for helping out!!! (Hallie)

Inspiration + practical information-sharing
Donna! I mentioned your A in math today in an orientation to encourage other students like myself to use the Study Groups. I also told other students to use the Tri-C Facebook page for encouragement on anything a student could possibly be going through with their academics. We are a Great Support System to one another. Let's keep up the Good Work!! Gooooo Ussss!!! (Althea)

Inspiration + practical information-sharing
We can do it! Stay focused and don't be afraid to seek help when it's needed- that's what the tutors and writing center are there for. Have confidence that you CAN do it. The hard work will pay off in the not so distant future; keep your chin up and go for it! (Susan)

Practical information-sharing
I took Math 950 last term and we would meet an hour before the exams and work together. We did that through the finals even. It helped alot and it was a nice way to get to know the other classmates. (Donna)

Practical information-sharing
Donna you have given me a gauge on how long to make a study group if and when I decide to begin a group. I was already thinking about 1-2 hrs. I am going into 0950 Math this semester. I have good hope I can pass this math also. (Althea)

HELP... if your over 40 you will understand this... being back in school after close to 30 years is somewhat intimidating but yet great at the same time. Need support!!!

(Lindsey)

Im on my second year back to school, the first few weeks are like anything else, an adjustment, but there are a lot of great people, and us "old farts" have a tendency to flock together, so you will be fine!

(Teresa)

hope and encouragement by sharing similar experiences that they had gone through. This was especially common in the weeks before classes began as students expressed their trepidation of the unknown.

Students, often coded as Emotional Sharer archetypes, wrote about their fear in a vulnerable way. In response, fellow students, usually coded as Counselor archetypes, responded with affirmation and reassurance and specific suggestions for student success. Some students wrote that they felt intimidation and directly asked for "support" from other students through the app. Other nontraditional students responded by affirming that there were supportive people in the school, expressing solidarity with other

... not sure if I'm cut out for this? Guess I will give it a semester?... I think I am to old haven't been to school for 25 years

(Jane)

Jan hang in there. I was overwhelmed at first but I stayed focused and I am seeing the light at the end of the tunnel Its a great feeling.

(Marlena)

That's great thank you again for encouraging me. I do need it...

(Jane)

nontraditional students, and predicting success for the student who felt intimidated. Another student articulated the specific subject of her nervousness: fear of academic incompetence, of not having what it takes to succeed in college.

It appears that for these nontraditional students, social media became a means through which they expressed their fears that they were not "cut out" for higher education. As a result, they obtained reassurance and encouragement from other nontraditional students that they did, in fact, have what it takes, that they could succeed, and that they were not alone. The reassurance came from the solidarity of other students with whom they shared a nontraditional student identity, not from the app itself. The app became a vehicle that students used to identify with each other and express their support. Students expressed the assurance of success in college because of being connected to teach other: "Us 'old farts' have a tendency to flock together, so you will be fine!" (Teresa)

I'm a older (almost 40) returning back to college starting a whole new degree. Anyone like me...?

(Megan)

Anyone like me? theme. Students used social media to express their identity as nontraditional students. Sometimes they asked whether there were others like them at the college. In other cases, nontraditional students stated their age and/or parental, marital, and/or employment status. These indicators demonstrate that they were older, usually working, and often had children and/or were married. Other students responded with positive emotion, indicated by exclamation points, stating they could relate, saying they felt inspired, wishing the original poster well, or reassuring the poster that there were many similar nontraditional students in the college. It was clear that nontraditional students sought a connection with similar others. They drew strength and confidence in their ability to succeed in college by feeling connected with people who share their life situation. Social media made that connection possible.

... I have two teenagers and a husband. It takes a lot of effort but worth it. I am not going for what you are but I wish you much success. (Donna)

I'm the same age... There are a lot of us. (Jennifer)

...Nice to meet people similar to myself... (Megan)

Do I belong in college? theme. Even though adult students comprised 36% in the community colleges in our study, nontraditional students ironically expressed feeling that they were in the minority and alone on the community college campus. For example, adult student Amanda wrote on the app, “Being an older student in a basically younger persons’ college makes me more anxious...” (Amanda). Nontraditional students appeared to feel a need to connect with others like themselves that was not being met on campus. Even though older students’ perceptions may not accurately reflect the reality of their large presence, they perceived that they were different and that they did not belong on campus. The social media app to seems to provide an opportunity for adult students to counteract that sense of isolation that they perceive in other contexts in the institution.

Besides asking on the app whether they were alone, students also expressed feeling out-of-place as older students, wrote about their apprehension during the period before classes began, and questioned whether it was really appropriate for them to be in the college environment. In response, other students normalized the experience of returning to school in middle age and shared their own positive experiences of classroom interactions with diverse age groups and feelings of acceptance.

After hearing nontraditional students voice their concerns on social media about the appropriateness of being in college, other students used the app to reassure the original doubter. They did this by encouraging them that there were a variety of ages, that the environment was welcoming, and that there are occasionally students who were even older.

Difference as liability theme. Students expressed the burden or additional weight that they felt because of their multiple identities and accompanying family responsibilities, including pressure to manage their time, help children with their homework, schedule classes when children were in school, or enroll in online classes. Students also used social media to express their identity as nontraditional and to explain how their their family responsibilities created obstacles to being more physically present on campus for activities or clubs. Other students with the nontraditional identity expressed that caring for children put pressure on them to carefully regulate their time, made it difficult for them to participate in campus activities, and kept them from attending classes at normal times (or from attending on-campus classes at all).

Being a full time student, a mother of two little children, a wife, and a work-study student it is not easy at all. There isn't time to waste, and it is important to plan ahead. ...I have to help my kids with their homework and do mine. But it is wonderful. It is a challenge to me. I want to graduate one day, and that is the hard part. The most important to keep oneself focused in the things that one wants, and one would reach one's goals. It is hard, but not impossible. (Eva)

...it sure is a challenge to juggle school, work and family! ... Good luck! Keep on keepin on, the end is almost here! :) (Tanisha)

Difference as asset theme. While the responsibilities that adult students carry were frequently framed on the app as liabilities, in other instances they were described as assets. App users described their difference as nontraditional students as an asset in four ways. First, they framed their family as a source of strength for their studies. Second, returning adult students mentioned the desire to set an example of perseverance for their children. Third, older students discussed possessing the wisdom that comes from years of living and looked forward to the opportunity to share that with other students. Fourth, nontraditional students concluded that their life experience motivated them to focus on academics over campus social distractions. Nontraditional students' described themselves as unique in this way from traditional students.

Nontraditional students viewed as an asset what others saw as only a liability, simultaneously expressing their pride in their distinctiveness as returning adults. The weight of obligations that older students bear is often viewed by outsiders only as a liability. However, on the app, adult students themselves also saw the asset their family responsibilities bring them in providing both strength and motivation to continue.

Hi All, My name is Pamela. I am 38 yrs old married with two girls...I am a full-time mother & wife with a full-time job...My friends keep me strong, but my family make me stronger.

(Pamela)

You can do it.

(Molly)

... I have 3 boys... You and the ladies that have posted below you are wonderful role models for your children! College is never out of reach as long as your willing to work!

(Marla)

Thanks everyone it is hard, but I refuse to let my girls see me fail or myself for that reason ...

(Pamela)

These posts resonated with other nontraditional students as evidenced by responses by many others who self-identified as being older, married, and having children.



Discussion

The findings shed light on how nontraditional-age community college students actually use social media to negotiate their multiple identities, express their unique struggles and challenges, provide support to each other, and thereby experience social and academic integration in college life. Students’ posts on the Facebook app add to our understanding of nontraditional student engagement. In the social media space, nontraditional students request, offer, and receive support on an emotional and practical level from those who share their multiple identities. Other encouraging students urged older students who expressed fear to form study groups, utilize tutors and the writing center, have confidence, know they have the ability, recognize that their feeling is normal, and continue to utilize the social media app itself to find support.

First, the people that adult students seek out in the social media space are those with whom they share a collective identity. Connecting with other older students appears to provide them with a positive feeling and a sense of belonging. When nontraditional students questioned the appropriateness of even being in college, other students responded with specific support. When students asked whether there was anyone “like them” (older, having children, and working), other nontraditional students quickly replied that they themselves were indeed in the same life stage.

Second, and perhaps most illuminating, nontraditional students appear to be using social media to reaffirm and legitimate their identity as adult students by searching for others who share their identity, which contributes to their social and academic integration. For example, many students identify with each other as parents, which is part of their collective identity. Prior theory suggests that this is a positive aspect of identity building. Students write about their nontraditional identity for the express purpose

of obtaining support in their new college-going endeavor in ways that might ultimately contribute to their persistence: “HELP... if your over 40 you will understand this... being back in school after close to 30 years is somewhat intimidating but yet great at the same time. Need support!!!” (Lindsey). Thus our findings confirm a widely-accepted definition of virtual community, “people who interact to satisfy their own needs...” (Preece, 2000). Returning adult students expressed that they felt like outsiders at the college because they didn’t belong to the group that they perceived as the ideal student (Kasworm, 2010a) (younger students) and their nontraditional status was a stigma to them (Brewer, 1991).

After a student reached out for help, other nontraditional students would express their common identity with them as being older, being a parent, etc. By finding other older students on the app, returning adults appear to be converting their sense of stigma into a badge of belonging, a new social identity as nontraditional students (Brewer, 1991). As they become part of a virtual community on the app whose members share a collective identity, older students simultaneously meet needs of both distinctiveness and belonging with other nontraditional students (Brewer, 1991; Cheung et al., 2011; Chiu et al., 2006; Zhao et al., 2012). Returning adults appear to conclude that their group is unique in a way that they are proud of, especially when they compare their group to others, a critical component of social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Bartel, 2001). These interactions of expressing fear and connecting with similar others seem to be socio-academic integrative moments. Socio-academic integrative moments have been shown to be linked to persistence (Deil-Amen, 2011) and may offer a partial explanation why students active on the *Schools App* had higher persistence rates than students not active on the app. Exploring

what appears to be a link between identity and persistence opens a potentially fruitful avenue of investigation for future researchers.

Students express the link between identity, integration, and persistence in their posts. Lydia, for example, wrote, “It gives me motivation when I hear about people like me doing it!!!” After other nontraditional students described their identities as parents, spouses, and workers, Althea expressed the motivation it gave her by posting, “Wow ...truly inspiring... Right there with you.” Students sharing the nontraditional identity provided inspiration to each other, like Brittany, who wrote, “I was in the same boat last Fall! You’ll do great and be the most experienced one in all of your classes! Plus, you’ll be more focused too!” Social media allows us to observe in real time one of the mechanisms described in prior research: adult students building their student role as they relate to other students (Kasworm, 2010b).

Third, many nontraditional students do not see student as their primary identity. As they introduce themselves in the social media space, students often give preeminence to other identities above their student identity (parent or caregiver, spouse or partner, employee). This finding has not been given significant attention in previous studies. The identity that returning adult students share with each other on the app actually involves a set of overlapping group memberships, of which student is only one: Employees (usually full-time), parents or caregivers, spouses or partners, and students who are older. Often, their primary identity is not that of a student. We have not found other research which has discussed a student identity in which student was not primary.

We argue that these adult community college students are developing a holistic, comprehensive identity as members of a group whose members share multiple sub-identities: worker, parent or caregiver, spouse or partner, and older student.

Joining this group, or assuming this identity, is their way of integrating student into their personal identity without letting go of the other prior components.

We conceive that these adults are awakening an additional identity (student) which they add to their existing identities. Older community college students are not seeking out membership in the numerous groups of traditional-age students (cf. Levin, Montero-Hernandez, & Cerven, 2010). Instead, they are adding a new identity to their repertoire and at the same time, they are searching in the social media space for others who share similar multiple identities. As one older student wrote on the app, “It helps you to know that there’s kind of people just like you” (Emily).

Fourth, our findings confirm earlier investigation that work and family responsibilities can positively affect college success by providing skills and motivation to persist and to excel in school. Pamela posted, “I refuse to let my girls see me fail,” reflecting the motivation her children provide her to persist. Amanda wrote, “I have a lot of life experience to offer and I am excited to share that knowledge,” expressing her view of her age as an asset to her college experience. Their experience reinforces the data showing that part-time work does not appear to hinder the persistence of community college students (Levin et al., 2010, p. 51). And they view their identity as older students as providing them valuable insight that younger students have not yet gained and giving them the perspective that adds greater focus to achieve academically. This comparison between groups of students reinforces nontraditional students’ identity as distinct and advantageous (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Bartel, 2001).

Fifth, nontraditional community college students articulated the principal reasons that being a nontraditional student is a liability. The most common expression of the negative impact of their life stage on success in college

was the challenge of childcare. Specifically, older students expressed that their responsibility for childcare impacts their schedule of classes, which often had to be at night (when another caregiver was available) or limited them to online courses. Childcare also affected their ability to concentrate on their homework and the time they had available to study. Additionally, childcare reduced the amount of time that adult students had available to physically spend on campus and participate in on-campus activities.

Sixth, previous literature had only identified female students as experiencing feelings of fear and intimidation as they reenter student life. The present study found that male students expressed similar feelings of intimidation as they enter community college.

Seventh, our findings confirm earlier research (Henningsen, 2003) which found that social integration is an important factor in nontraditional student persistence, over against most scholars of nontraditional students who did not even include social integration variables in their tests. However, we suggest that such social integration processes involve collective identity validation for these students as a central component. On *Schools App*, older students on the app share personal and emotional exchanges, often related to their identity as adult students, beyond simple academic information-sharing. The process of adult students initiating sharing, and other nontraditional peers responding with inspiration and/or reassurance, appears to contribute to nontraditional students’ feelings of integration, and may help explain the increased persistence of older app users.



Conclusion

The findings suggest that community colleges must engage nontraditional students in ways that move beyond the type of traditional on-campus engagement described by Tinto (1975, 1988, 1993) and beyond models that ignore or dismiss social integration completely (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Chartrand, 1992; Craig & Ward, 2007; Farabaugh-Dorkins, 1991; Metzner & Bean, 1987; Stahl & Pavel, 1992). Our conception of integrating nontraditional-age students into college communities should center on their identities as such and acknowledge their need to be validated by similar peers.

Our most promising finding is that social media can be part of the solution to the challenge of connecting older students to their two-year institutions. Because of their distinct life circumstances, nontraditional students appear to engage in school in a very different way, by connecting with others who share their identity and providing each other with support. Because of these distinctive circumstances, social media can play a unique role in older students' bonding. The interactive nature of social media enables students to provide others

who share their nontraditional identity with social and academic support that they tend not to obtain through the traditional means that traditional students use. The social media space also enables scholars to observe students' real-time construction of college-going strategies. Community colleges would be well advised to continue to experiment with ways to harness the power of social media, as well as other strategies, to enhance the success of adult students. There is also great potential for future research to further examine nontraditional student engagement and persistence in community college, and the role that identity may play in the process.



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