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Exploring the early expectations and ambitions of first generation female students within an Australian University

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A recent workshop series covered a range of topics: Show Me the Money, Part I (Scholarships) and Part II (Financial Aid); Balance Your Life Workshop; and, Get Ready for Finals/Improve Your Study Skills! We are committed to helping re-entry students reach their goals. Our approach to service is student-centered and our philosophy is profoundly illustrated by the words of McCabe (1998):

The greatest strength of our nation is the belief in the value of every human being and the commitment to help each person reach full potential. Perhaps more than any other institution, the community college holds the promise of democracy and the belief that individuals who lack important competencies do not necessarily lack the ability to fulfill personal educational goals. (p. 33)


**EVENING DIVISION**

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At the University of the Pacific, McGeorge School of Law, we have seen an increase in the number of applicants looking to complete law school on a part-time basis, through our Evening Division program. Most of these students are “non-traditional” students, having taken time off after completing their undergraduate degree, to work or start a family.

Many of these students have a difficult time transitioning back into the rigors of the academic setting. In order to assist them, Pacific McGeorge is currently working with a group of non-traditional students, assessing their needs and working to provide better programs and support for incoming students. These programs involve student mentorships, extended academic preparation orientation and increased access to services during evening hours.

Having been an evening student at Pacific McGeorge, I can attest to the value of the broad range of student backgrounds in the Evening Division class. The average age of our 100 person section, back in 1994 was 35. Today, the average age is about 26, but the ethnic and socio-economic diversity, and the vast work experience of the students is still as prominent today as it was when I started. Part-time students, who work during the day, bring that work experience into the classroom and are able to provide a practical perspective to the legal theories being taught.

As a student affairs professional, I am constantly working to ease the transition of these non-traditional students back into academic life. What I have happily found is that non-traditional students in their second, third and fourth years at Pacific McGeorge are more than willing to assist me and the school in these efforts. They see the value in assisting others with the transition, and the value of assuring we do everything we can to help these students excel.

**EXPLORING THE EARLY EXPECTATIONS AND AMBITIONS OF FIRST GENERATION FEMALE STUDENTS WITHIN AN AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITY - A QUALITATIVE STUDY.**

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Kantans (2000) eloquently sums up the feelings of students as they enter the university environment, suggesting that ‘…first year students cannot help but experience a sense of dilemma, at the very least, and utter confusion at worst, as to their expected role and responsibilities…’ (para.22). Whilst these descriptors are applied across first year student cohorts, arguably for those defined as ‘non-traditional’ such fears and emotions are exaggerated. This article explores what has been termed the ‘First Year Experience’ of students who are the first in their immediate family to attend university. Whilst the term ‘First Year Experience’ has only relatively recently gained currency within Australian higher education circles, interest in this particular period of student life has existed since the early fifties (McInnis, James & McNaught, 1995). Arguably, this interest has become more apparent as student populations become more diverse and educational institutions are put under increasing pressure to be more economically efficient and accountable. In short, the study of the transition process is vital as student attrition and failure has both individual and institutional impacts, for the student such an occurrence can have far-reaching social and psychological consequences while for the institution it is costly and can be perceived as a poor reflection on pedagogical and structural practices.

Berger and Braxton (1998) refer to the withdrawal process as a ‘departure puzzle’ (p.104) and highlight how this has attracted attention from both scholarly researchers and university policy makers or ‘practitioners’. These parties often have a slightly different focus on this research field, the former largely interested in devising a solution to the riddle while the latter seeks to create pragmatic strategies that serve both student and institution. Indeed, Longden (2002) argues that while retention is of interest to state, educational institution and student, the focus of this interest differs dramatically. However, having said that most of the research in this area is linked by a common theme that being to ultimately explain why some students continue in their studies and others become ‘drop-out’ statistics.

Clearly, reasons for attrition and retention cannot be solely attributed to the transition process but research into this process will contribute to creating a knowledge base
beneficial to both students and institutions. Research on this area is often characterised by a focus on internal and external variables that effect levels of persistence and transition to the academic community. However, many of these studies have been criticised as being largely ‘...preoccupied with the manipulation of variables in an attempt to uncover causality...’ (Ozga & Sukhnanand, 1998, p.317), whilst others have been questioned in relation to the nature of variables expounded particularly in the light of the diversity of student populations (Mackie, 2001). Indeed, for all those students regarded as non-traditional, variables beyond those identified by many of the theorists influence decisions relating to persistence or withdrawal.

Pascarella and Terenzini (1998) analysed over 2,600 studies that purported to highlight the multifaceted effects of college on students. However, closer analysis revealed that these studies were limited to particular types of institutions and specific cohorts of students, focusing on ‘... ‘traditional’, white...students, ages 18-22 who attended four-year institutions full-time, who lived on campus...and who had few...family responsibilities.’ (para. 2). Accordingly, much of the resulting research has largely succeeded in theorising a student population that is in the minority. Since the early eighties, the tertiary landscape in America and in other countries such as Australia has profoundly shifted as the student body has become more ethnically diverse, older and increasingly including those that are also employed and are the first in their immediate family to attend higher education.

This study uses qualitative methodology to explore the interplay of factors and experiences that aid or impede transition and socialization into a new learning environment. The sixteen female participants have all been recruited from a smaller regional campus located on the Central Coast of NSW, Australia, which caters to a diverse scope of students from a range of educational backgrounds. There is a high proportion of female students studying at this campus, many of whom are mature-aged, have limited schooling or have been absent from the education sector for a number of years. The research concentrates on the female student population but focuses on those women who are the first in the family to attend university and are enrolled in the first year of study. At this stage, the first set of interviews has been conducted but three further sets of interviews are planned with each of the sixteen before the end of the academic year. In addition, participants have been asked to complete two email questionnaires, each of which will be sent out during the semester breaks. It is intended that interviews will build upon each other, with early interviews shaping the content of later meetings and the questions that will be asked whilst email feedback will enable subjects to respond in an immediate way to requests and is less intrusive than an interview format. At this stage in the research, it is illuminating to explore the early narratives of these students, particularly those classed as mature aged, which have emerged in the interviews conducted in the initial weeks of this first year of study. The data reveals how despite the early stages of the study common themes relating to initial experiences and expectations are very apparent.

For many of these students, commencing tertiary studies initiated feeling of anxiety, unfamiliarity and self-doubt, emotions clearly revealed in the narratives and expressions used by respondents to describe their first day of attendance:

I was very nervous before the lecture I was up most of the night feeling sick in the stomach ... (Stephanie, 34)

Ahh, nervous as anything, I went through a week of not sleeping not because I thought I couldn’t do it but just basically a fear of the unknown I was like so nervous... (Sheila, 30’s)

The first lecture was described as ‘overwhelming’ (Candy, 39), ‘scary’ (Jane, 30’s,) and ‘very daunting’ (Clara, 23) leading to feelings of ‘panic’ (Clara) and an initial sense of ‘Oh gosh what am I doing and questioning myself...’ (Clara). Despite such initial misgivings, each of the mature age respondents expressed an almost grim determination to succeed in this new environment, each citing ‘failing’ as being the worst thing that they could imagine happening:

Yeah, failing did I say failing [laughs]... I don’t doubt my capabilities I know I’ll do really well cos ya know when I put my mind to it I do well so yeah, the fear of failure... (Candy, 39)

Emm, probably to fail something and they say: Ah, you’ve got to do a whole subject again even though its not really that bad and I probably wouldn’t ever let it happen but em, that’s probably the worst thing that could happen – that’s how it feels to me at the moment(Cathy, 20’s)

...so I started prac last Friday so if I were to withdraw from uni I would have a fail against my name so you can’t pull out at that point so its not an option if I was going to withdraw from the university it would have to be after I got that pass so I put that pressure on myself but yeah, I won’t fail. (Linda, 30’s)

Failing, yeah, failing or not being able to get an assignment in because maybe my children fall sick which has happened two weeks ago ...and maybe being told that you can’t hand your assignment in late and missing out on the marks that would have passed you so I think failing would be the worst thing yeah and having to do it all again; I think everyone would say that (Susie, 38.)

Perhaps, this fear is partially reflective of the fact that for most of the older interviewees, the decision to enrol was not taken lightly and had quite clear financial and emotional repercussions. Prior to enrolling, some of the women spoke of negotiations with partners and children, for example Stephanie describes how she ‘harped on my husband for a whole year’ until he agreed ‘initially very reluctant’ as ‘he didn’t think I’d finish it so I told him we’ll see how I go for this year...’ Sheila describes how the decision involved
discussions with both her husband and young children and how the ensuing approval increased her self belief in her abilities:

I had a discussion with my husband about it cos it meant me leaving work and it meant him taking on a few extra responsibilities as well so I knew it wouldn’t just affect myself and then I said to my kids: What do you think and I actually asked them what they thought and I said: ‘Mummy wants to be a teacher’ and they said: ‘Ohhh, yeah that sounds good mum!’ so but whether they really knew exactly what that sorta entailed but that’s I think why I sorta felt yes I can do this……(Sheila, 30’s)

The role of family in relation to decisions to about attending university was referred to in a number of interviews. Frequently, the decision to enrol was a result of either encouragement from family members or was justified on the grounds of fiscal benefit to the family. However, a number of the women also revealed that attendance at university was the realisation of a long-term goal or ambition and hence, displayed a high level of determination and commitment in relation to their studies.

…it’s not a matter of will I stick it out or not , I’m doing a four year course I will graduate at the end, okay I might not have distinctions and everything because I refuse to put that pressure on me …but I’ll know that I have done the best I can… (Candy, 39)

…one of the main reasons why I haven’t gone: No, this is a dream I can’t achieve, I’m just going to walk away, I’ve just sorta gone: No, there’s gotta be a way through this and I’ve just sorta looked for another way, I’ve thought: No, I haven’t like come back here for no reason and I’m going to get through this time so yeah, my circumstances have never been better for studying and there not going to get any better so y’know that’s the way I look at it and if I’m going to do it it’s now.(Vicki, 40’s)

Despite this determination to succeed, when I interviewed the students in the fourth week of the semester, most expressed some level of disappointment about the course. Twelve of the participants mentioned that their expectations and reality did not match and as a result, many expressed some level of disenchantment with the reality. For example, students were surprised by the size of tutorial groups expecting small intimate groups focused on collegial discussion instead some of the tutorials included up to 30 students. Another major disappointment was the lack of direction afforded by the academic staff in relation to academic expectations and practices. Arguably for students, both school leavers and mature-aged, who are the first in their families to go to university, there may be few ‘role models’ available to them and little assistance in relation to comprehending the different cultural and academic expectations of university life. Such feelings can add stress and anxiety to an already difficult situation, initiating a downward spiral that may lead to ultimately to withdrawal, both academic and social. Indeed as Stone (2004) states: “These kinds of fears and uncertainties can be a potent mixture for failure in the first year of tertiary studies – often by withdrawing rather than actually failing to make the grade in their assessments”. (p2)

For some of the participants, the expectations had been derived from previous educational experience and this undoubtedly had a part to play in the disillusionment with the reality:

“I thought it would be like school …but being here you sorta see it just like no-one sorta cares about you as such if you don’t do the work they don’t care they don’t follow anything up , they think ahh, if you don’t hand an assignment in that’s your problem and stuff like that and it’s too hard well it took me a while to get use to it and I’m still getting use to it…”(Carly, 18)

“The shock of the expectations that I mean I know that its not like TAFE [College of Technical and Further Education] or like school where you get spoon-fed but okay read chapter three by next week is fine if that is the only subject that you are doing but I’ve got all these other things. Its just like it was daunting to think wow there is so much expected from me…” (Nicki, 33)

However, on a more positive note eight of the mature students expressed relief about the presence of other older students at the campus. Having other mature students in the class or just visible at the campus validated many of these participants and justified their decision to come to university at this later stage in life. Vicki describes how her initial thoughts focused on: ‘Ohmigod I don’t want to be the oldest person at university..’ and continues to explain how she thought it was a bit like ‘…going back to High School again: Ohmigod is everyone looking at me y’know how do I look sorta thing ..’ However, later in the interview she explains how the presence of other older students increased her levels of confidence and made for a more comforting initiation into this environment. Similarly, Christine explains a similar focus on age on her first day of lectures:

“…I’m watching people walking around thinking “I don’t know anybody’ but yeah I remember thinking: ‘Oh good she ‘s older, she’s older ‘ [laughs] I think I must have been pretty preoccupied with age… there was a lady who sat on the seat behind me and she was like, well she wasn’t a young one its hard to tell people’s ages but yeah, she was similar to my age I’d imagine and she looked pretty harassed [laughs] I said: Ahh it’s a bit daunting isn’t it and she said yes, so we started chatting a little bit which was good so it calmed the nerves a bit so yeah…”

Finally, another aspect of study that most of the students did not anticipate was the amount of work required by the
course and the speed of progression through the subject matter. Some of the women mentioned that while they expected some additional study beyond face-to-face lectures, the intensity of this came as a shock. As Sheila explains: ‘I imagined that it would be y’know fairly tough and be lots of work but I didn’t well I probably didn’t think as much like...’ Kira likened her course to a rollercoaster and revealed how morale was already depleted amongst students:

“I already do feel that it is amazing how many students you talk to even young they feel useless and they feel dumb cos they don’t cos they didn’t understand things they still don’t understand a lot of things, the teacher is trying to teach them because as I said it’s rushed everything is rushed and it’s like a roller coaster ride you join it get on and join it or get left behind and like I know just a lot of class when people are getting their assignments back they are feeling oh are you laughing at us are we that dumb and I think that is bad, it is very negative in general”

Despite the early stages of this research, the quotes outlined above provide some understanding of the complexity of issues surrounding the access and retention of non-traditional students. Globally, there has been much discussion about the growth of the education sector and the ensuing ‘massification’ of education within countries such as Australia, America and Britain. However, despite dramatic growth in participation, the numbers of enrolled students deemed economically or socially disadvantaged have not grown proportionally. Forsyth and Furlong (2003) suggest that within Britain the increase in student numbers is likely to be made up of ‘...more (i.e. less able) middle-class entrants, rather than this increase being accounted for by the inclusion of the disadvantaged.’ (p221) This situation is reflected within the Australian tertiary landscape, with figures indicating that the percentage of low – SES students accessing university has remained largely unchanged in the period 1993-2003. (James, cited in Skene, 2003). Equally, Couvillion-Landry (2002 – 2003) highlights how while American statistics suggest that the numbers of ‘minority students’ enrolling in tertiary education are increasing slightly, this student group is still underrepresented. Clearly, better conceptualization about the various student groups that fall under the non-traditional banner is required to facilitate both better access and success. Such knowledge is particularly pertinent for those of us who work in the student support areas on campus as with such understanding comes the possibility of better facilitating student transition and success.

With the second set of interviews just a few weeks away, the data outlined in this article will be further refined and negotiated, areas that demand further exploration include the developing student identity of participants, the long-term impact of first in the family status, developments in expectations and also, long-term academic outcomes. The narratives and themes emerging will be built upon to enrich understanding but obviously such reflection does not suggest universal application. Rather, students as individuals have very unique experiences but clearly some links and commonalities are visible. Interviews will continue throughout the year culminating with a retrospective analysis of the year in its entirety. The researcher looks forward to accompanying these students on their first year journey, and expects revelations and surprises along the way as they painstakingly negotiate this university landscape.

Reference List