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Motivational Differences among Traditional and Nontraditional Students Enrolled in Metropolitan Universities

Students at a large metropolitan campus were surveyed about their motivational orientation and attitudes toward school. Results indicated that nontraditional students, aged 25 years and older, were more intrinsically motivated and traditional students, up to age 24, were more extrinsically motivated. Students did not significantly differ in some attitudes and actions, such as the desire to be better prepared for a career, or in the number of hours worked per week. These results are discussed in the context of campus retention programs.

With enrollments fluctuating at colleges and universities around the country and increases in financial support at a minimum, higher education officials continue to be concerned with retention (Hossler, 1991; Tichenor & Cosgrove, 1991; Wilcox, 1991). As we examined retention issues, it became clear that some of the reasons why students leave college are influenced by the university, while others are solely determined by the student. We examined motivational orientation, the way intrinsic and extrinsic motivators influence attitudes and opinions about college, especially the differences between traditional-aged (up to 24 years) and nontraditional-aged (25 years and over) students, a diverse student population often found at the metropolitan university.

What is motivational orientation? This term refers to a level of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation found in all of us. With respect, the idea is that Intrinsic motivation comes from within, and, in reference to schooling, achievement and success are gauged internally, from the student's perspective. Students with an intrinsic orientation seek mastery, have curiosity, and have a preference for challenge. In the education process, extrinsic motivation requires more external rewards, such as grades, opinions of others, praise, teacher rewards, and teacher approval (Rea, 1991). How one's education is motivated, intrinsically or extrinsically, might certainly be correlated to retention. In this study, we focused our

efforts on the assessment of motivational orientation in college students with a particular emphasis on the age, traditional or nontraditional, of the student.

How do nontraditional and traditional students differ on measures of motivational orientation? Not much is known about this topic. Prager (1983) found that nontraditional students differ from traditional students in their feelings and motives about education: that self-esteem was important with nontraditional students, and that levels of self-esteem were linked to skills already possessed. Other studies have touched on motivation differences between these age groups from a different perspective. Epstein (1987), cited in McGregor et al. (1991) concluded, in a study that focused on matriculation, that nontraditional students are really not that different from traditional students in factors motivating them to become college students.

What types of differences exist between traditional and nontraditional students? The answer to this question is ambiguous. Some studies have shown that nontraditional students report more satisfaction with their college experiences than traditional students (Landrum, Hood, & McAdams, 1997; Sturtz, 1971). Other studies have found virtually no differences between the age groups (McGregor et al., 1991), suggesting that nontraditional students are not that different from traditional students. Kasworm (1982) has suggested that part of the discrepancy of results in these types of studies is due to the variability of the nontraditional group. Even though treated as a group, in some ways it is not a very homogeneous one.

Why is it important for both teachers and learners, especially in the college classroom, to be aware of motivational differences between nontraditional and traditional students? Motivation strategies affect the learning process. Morgan (1978) found that extrinsically manipulated grade contingencies (on a final exam) motivated student learning, without detracting from intrinsically-oriented students' interests. In a somewhat related theme, McNeill and Kimmel (1988) found that extrinsic motivators, such as money, dramatically decreased intrinsic motivation levels, with detrimental effects on performance.

From a different perspective, Rea (1991) reported that a teacher's over-reliance on extrinsic rewards or punishments could undermine intrinsic motivation. Clearly part of this difference lies between use and over-reliance on extrinsic motivation techniques. Goudas, Biddle, and Underwood (1995) found that perception of autonomy and competence affects intrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation has a strong effect on intention; they suggest providing autonomy to create intrinsic motivation in our students.

Motivational orientation becomes a potentially important topic when considering nontraditional student adjustment and retention. Chartrand (1990) reported that nontraditional student adjustment is influenced by the importance of a positive self-evaluation and the student's commitment to the student role. She found that low self-confidence places nontraditional students at risk for dropping out of school, and also found an inverse relationship between family roles and level of commitment to work or school.

What conclusion can we draw from these studies? Some find measurable differences between nontraditional and traditional students (Landrum et al., 1997; Prager, 1983; Sturtz, 1971) while others conclude minimal differences (Epstein, 1987; McGregor et al. 1991), and Kasworm (1982) warns of some of the problems with studies involving nontraditional students. The present study was designed to directly address the

relationship between age status, nontraditional vs. traditional, and motivational orientation, of students enrolled in a metropolitan university. If more intrinsic motivation and less extrinsic motivation is evidence of maturity, would nontraditional students score significantly higher compared to traditional students on intrinsic motivation questions? What are the differences, in terms of motivational orientation and other related issues, between the two student groups, if any? These are the questions that we attempted to answer with this study.

Method

Participants

Three hundred twenty-seven undergraduates at Boise State University participated in this study. Students, whose participation was fully voluntary, were recruited at several locations on campus, such as the student union building, classroom buildings, and library. Students aged 17 to 24 years are categorized as traditional ($n = 184$); students aged 25 years and older are categorized as nontraditional ($n = 143$). Of those reporting their gender, 51.3 percent were female, and 48.7 percent were male (13 of 327 declined to answer the gender question). The overall average age was 26.0 ($SD = 7.5$); average age of traditional students was 21.0 ($SD = 1.7$), and the average age of nontraditional students was 32.5 ($SD = 7.1$).

Materials

Rea's 1991 Motivation Outcomes Assessment Instrument (MOAI) was administered to all participants. This 16-question survey, with responses on a 7-point Likert scale with 1 = very unimportant to 7 = very important, identifies half of these items as indicators of intrinsic motivation, and half as indicators of extrinsic motivation. Instructions for the MOAI ask students to "Please rate each of the following items in level of importance to you." Rea reports reliability of the MOAI with a standardized item alpha of 0.77.

Nine additional questions were asked of participants. Students provided information about age, gender, number of children, number of hours worked per week, and current cumulative GPA. Students were asked to rate their satisfaction with their college education (7-point satisfaction scale), and respond to the questions "I enjoy school and learning," "My grades reflect my actual learning," and "I feel that professors really care if I learn the material presented in class" (7-point agreement scales).

Procedure

At various locations on campus, students were solicited to complete the questionnaires. Students were given the MOAI then the follow-up questions. Students were allowed as much time as needed, and most finished within 15 minutes. Participants were assured anonymity.

Results

The results indicated three distinct patterns of response. This section is divided to reflect those questions on which traditional students scored higher than nontraditional

students, nontraditional students scored higher than traditional students, and questions on which the two groups of students did not significantly differ. Some participants did not answer all questions.

Traditional Students Scoring Higher than Nontraditional Students

On the 16 items from Rea (1991), traditional students have significantly higher ratings of importance for the questions (a) to impress my friends favorably with my performance, (b) to please my parents with my performance, and (c) to impress my teacher favorably with my importance. Clearly, the higher scores reflect extrinsic motivation factors, such as the external approval of friends, parents, and teachers.

Additionally, Rea's (1991) extrinsic motivation questions were summated into a composite variable ("extrinsic motivation"). Traditional students had a significantly higher average score ($M = 4.44$, $SD = 0.94$) than nontraditional students ($M = 3.82$, $SD = 1.20$) on overall extrinsic motivation, $t(325) = 5.22$, $p < .001$. This provides additional support for the traditional-nontraditional differences exhibited beyond single-item differences.

Nontraditional Students Scoring Higher than Traditional Students

On the 16 items from Rea (1991), nontraditional students have significantly higher ratings of importance for the questions (a) to try my best even if I don't get the best grade, (b) to receive a grade that represents my best effort, (c) to understand the subject matter better, (d) to learn something new which I was not familiar with before, (e) to understand myself better, (f) to understand other people better, and (g) to gain practical knowledge that I can apply in everyday life. These items all clearly indicate intrinsic motivation.

Additionally, Rea's (1991) intrinsic motivation questions were summated into a composite variable ("intrinsic motivation"). Nontraditional students had a significantly higher score ($M = 6.18$, $SD = 0.63$) than traditional students ($M = 5.80$, $SD = 0.83$) on intrinsic motivation, $t(325) = -4.45$, $p < .001$. This provides additional support for the traditional-nontraditional differences exhibited beyond single-item differences.

There are additional differences between nontraditional and traditional students on which nontraditional students score significantly higher. Nontraditional students have more children than traditional students, they self-report a higher GPA, they report more satisfaction with college, they enjoy school and learning more, they feel that their grades reflect their actual learning, and more report feeling that professors really care whether they learn the material.

No Significant Differences Between the Student Groups

While there are a number of differences between the groups, it is important to remember that similarities do exist between the traditional and nontraditional students. When rating the importance of Rea's (1991) questions, there were no significant difference in ratings on the questions (a) to feel comfortable with people in class, (b) to have interactions with others in class, (c) to receive an "A" grade, (d) to find the instructor interesting, (e) to become better prepared for my career, and (f) to find the subject interesting.

One additional question, the number of hours worked per week, yielded results in which there was no significant difference between the groups. Although one might expect nontraditional students to be working more than traditional students, that was not the case in this sample.

Discussion

Do traditional and nontraditional students differ in their motivational orientation toward higher education in the metropolitan university setting? Based on this sample, our evidence suggests that the answer is yes. Where differences exist, traditional students are more likely to seek approval of their friends, parents, and professors, an indication of extrinsic motivation. Nontraditional students report higher importance ratings in trying their best, understanding the subject, learning something new, and learning practical skills that they can use, all indications of intrinsic motivation. These motivational orientation findings parallel the results of Prager (1983). It is interesting to note that similarities between groups underlie desires of college students that seem universal: to feel comfortable in class, to get an "A," and to find the subject and professor interesting. Also, there was no significant difference between the student groups in the number of hours worked per week.

Other questions asked, in addition to the MOAI, yielded significant differences between student groups. Nontraditional students report having more children, a higher GPA, more satisfaction with college, more enjoyment of school and learning, more agreement with grades reflecting actual learning, and more agreement with professors caring about learning. This pattern of results also supports the greater maturity and intrinsic motivation attributed to nontraditional students. Student satisfaction differences also parallel results found by others (Landrum et al., 1997; Sturtz, 1971).

Do nontraditional students warrant special programs based on the differences observed? In previous studies, such as McGregor et al. (1991), the conclusion was no. The present study clearly identifies motivational orientation differences between nontraditional and traditional students. Rather than design separate retention programs, perhaps metropolitan universities should be aware of differences between these student groups and encourage professors to incorporate this information in their instructional design. Instructors with a higher proportion of nontraditional students may wish to use learning strategies that focus on intrinsically motivating factors, such as the use of autonomy (Goudas et al., 1995). Although in some respects students are students, instructors and administrators at metropolitan universities should be aware of the important differences between traditional and nontraditional students.

Suggested Readings

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