

# Experiences of Nontraditional Undergraduate Students in an Occupational Therapy Program Cohort

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AOTA/NBCOT Education Summit

Atlanta, GA

October 5, 2013

Platform Session 20

## Session Objectives

- Briefly review what we know about nontraditional students, specifically in OT programs
- Introduce the Model of College Outcomes (Donaldson & Graham, 1999)
- Explore experiences of five nontraditional students within a single cohort using the Model of College Outcomes
- Review overarching themes
- Discuss implications for practice and future research

## Previous Research on Nontraditional Students in General Higher Education

- Identifying characteristics
- Learning styles
- Academic success
- Student needs
- Retention

<b>Traditional Students</b>	<b>Nontraditional Students</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 18 to 22 years old</li><li>• Straight from HS to college</li><li>• Full-time enrollment</li><li>• Part-time employment</li><li>• Most rely in part on financial support from family</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• AKA Adult Learners</li><li>• Age 24 or above</li><li>• Married / Long-term significant other</li><li>• Children</li><li>• Work 35+ hours / week</li><li>• Lack a HS diploma</li><li>• Delayed or part-time enrollment</li></ul>

## Previous Research on Nontraditional OT Students

- Late 1990s – Early 2000s: OT educational programs should prepare for more nontraditional students
- Then a dropoff in research on this topic in the OT literature
- Characteristics similar to nontraditional students in other programs, with two notable exceptions:
  - Work less due to full-time nature of most OT programs
  - Low attrition rate because most programs have highly competitive admissions process; already a history of strong academic performance and perseverance

## My Interest in the Topic

- Pursuing PhD in Educational Leadership & Policy Analysis
  - Exposure to educational models and conceptual frameworks
- What I was witnessing in my own classroom:
  - Mix of high-performing and struggling nontraditional students
  - Previous life experience resulting in a level of maturity and professional behavior that we aspire to instill in our traditional students
  - Varying support systems for nontraditional students, depending on how many nontraditional students were in a given cohort
- Desire to help a diverse group of learners succeed in our program

## Model of College Outcomes for Adults (Donaldson & Graham, 1999)

Six interactive components that can be used to analyze the experiences of adult learners:

- Prior Experience & Personal Biographies
- Psychosocial & Value Orientation
- Cognition
- Life-World Environment
- Connecting Classroom
- Outcomes

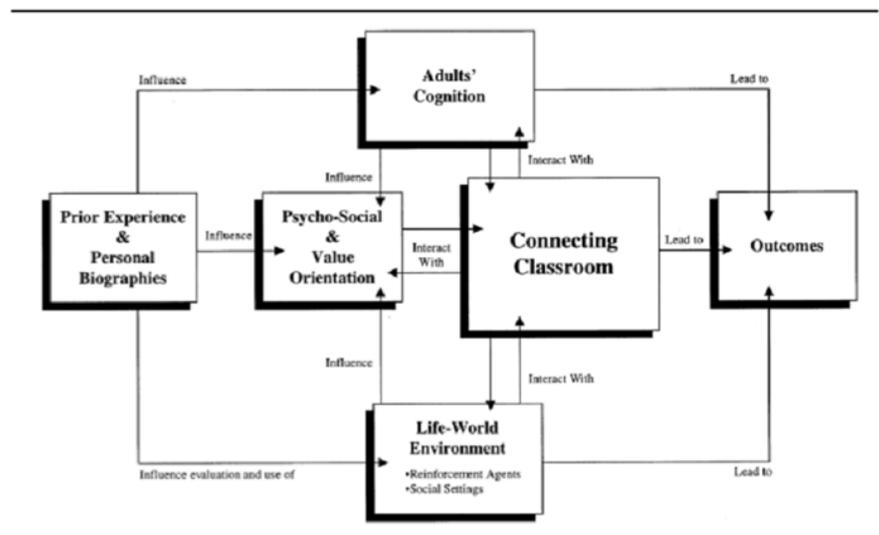


Figure 1. Model of College Outcomes for Adult Students

## **Research Gap**

- Limited research specifically on nontraditional OT students
- Majority of research on this population is from the United Kingdom
- Previous research overwhelmingly quantitative in nature
  - Little focus on the voices of students about their experiences
- Model of College Outcomes for Adults used primarily with nontraditional students in general education courses

## **Purpose of the Case Study**

- Extend the use of the Model of College Outcomes for Adults by exploring the experiences of nontraditional students within a small cohort of an OT program:
  - How do the prior experiences and personal biographies of nontraditional students impact their educational experiences within an OT program cohort?
  - How do nontraditional students' current life-world environments affect their educational experiences?
  - How do nontraditional students within an OT program cohort view their classroom and campus experiences as they relate to personal college outcomes?

## **Context**

- Large, Midwestern, public research university
- 3-year combined Baccalaureate/Master's program
- 30 students accepted per cohort
  - From 100+ qualified applicants, so all are very high academic performers
  - Majority of students are white, middle to upper-middle SES, and from suburban areas of large cities approximately 2 hours away
  - Approximately 3-10% per cohort considered "nontraditional" based on age, marital status, and/or dependent children

## **Researcher Positionality**

- 1995 graduate of the same program
  - Familiar with context
- Instructor of 3 previous courses for this cohort
  - Familiar with some personal student information that they had shared in class
  - Good rapport with students
  - Personal observations as instructor
- Recognized ethical issues related to faculty/student relationship and potential bias given my level of familiarity with context

## Participants

- 5 of 30 students (16.7%) in a single OT cohort were characterized as nontraditional based on age, marital status, and/or dependent children
- All 5 nontraditional students in this cohort (100%) eagerly agreed to participate
  - They were EXCITED to tell their stories!
- All 5 participants were white
- 4 of 5 participants were female

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Characteristics</b>
<b>Sophia</b>	Age 22, recently married, worked a few hours per week, spouse employed full-time and provided financial support
<b>Abigail</b>	Age 25, engaged, worked 30+ hours per week to maintain financial independence
<b>Jessi</b>	Age 34, single, previous career in accounting, Mom recently moved in, sister with a disability getting ready to move nearby, worked a few hours per week, relied on student loans
<b>Michelle</b>	Age 36, married with two young sons, previous associate's degree, work experience in horsemanship & veterinary clinic but most recently a stay-at-home Mom, repeat applicant, father paid tuition and college expenses
<b>Nick</b>	Age 55, retired police officer, undergoing significant changes and stresses in family life, financially stable from previous career

## Data Collection & Analysis

- Semi-structured interview protocol developed based on selected components of Model of College Outcomes:
  - Prior experiences and personal biographies
  - Current life-world environment
  - Connecting classroom
- Because the interviews were semi-structured, discussion also included information representative of the other model components:
  - Psychosocial and value orientation
  - Cognition
  - Outcomes
- Interviews lasted 30-90 minutes
- Audio recorded and transcribed verbatim
- Multiple levels of coding
  - Initially 34 codes
  - Reduced to 14 codes
  - 4 overarching themes
- Member checks to confirm validity of themes

Theme	Participant Quotes Relating to Each Theme
Different Paths / Same Goals – Emphasis on Learning over Grades	<p>“For me, grades are still important, but now it’s more about happiness. Happiness meaning that this is what I want to do with my life. I finally figured it out, and I’m doing it. And someday I know I’ll be a great OT. And that’s way more important than a grade in a particular class.” ~ <i>Michelle</i></p> <p>“Grades are important, but not that important. I mean, I try my best, but it’s more important to me that I’m learning the information. When I really, truly learn something and it sticks with me, or when I have that ‘a-ha’ moment, that’s when I know I’ll be able to use what I’ve learned as a future OT.” ~ <i>Jessi</i></p>
Work and Children as Biggest Factors Limiting Academic and Social Engagement with Peers	<p>“School, work, and wedding planning pretty much take up my time right now. I wish I could spend more time with my classmates, but I just have different priorities right now.” ~ <i>Abigail</i></p> <p>“There are definitely conversations that are non-school-related, but I don’t go out to eat with them or anything. With my new family issues, and traveling out of state all the time, I just can’t do it.” ~ <i>Nick</i></p> <p>“There’s the opportunity to do a lot more with other people, but I just devote that time to my family. And with all of my kids’ activities, my plate is full.” ~ <i>Michelle</i></p>
Commitment to Student Role Outweighed Life Stressors	<p>“After everything I had to go through just to be accepted into the program, school is absolutely a priority for me. I treat it like a daytime job.” ~ <i>Michelle</i></p> <p>“My husband knows that school is my top priority right now. He’s working toward obtaining a specialty certification in his profession, so we just study together.” ~ <i>Sophia</i></p> <p>“I love being a college student! Right now that defines who I am.” ~ <i>Jessi</i></p> <p>“I know some people think I put work before school, but that’s just not true. School is my top priority, but in order to attend school, I have to work. I can’t have one without the other.” ~ <i>Abigail</i></p> <p>“I tell everyone I talk to that I’m having the time of my life right now. This is the first time I’ve gone to school full time. This is my focus, regardless of what else is going on in my personal life.” ~ <i>Nick</i></p>
Sense of Inclusion from Faculty and Peers, Especially Other Nontraditional Students	<p>“One instructor made a point to say that she appreciated having students with a variety of backgrounds in her class so that her perspective is not the only one we hear about. I was really impressed with that.” ~ <i>Michelle</i></p> <p>“For the two years when I was doing prerequisites, I would always get stares like ‘What are you doing here?’ .... Since there were several nontraditional students coming into this small cohort, I didn’t feel the same isolation I had experienced previously.” ~ <i>Michelle</i></p> <p>“Everyone is nice, and I get invited to everything that they do. I just usually can’t go.” ~ <i>Abigail</i></p> <p>“I love the cohort model. You really get to know everyone so well. And I don’t feel that I’m so nontraditional that I’m isolated from my classmates.” ~ <i>Sophia</i></p> <p>“I’m old enough to be their father, but I still very much feel that I’m a part of this class.” - <i>Nick</i></p>

### **Limitations of Study and Implications for Future Research**

- Study was limited to a single cohort at a specific point in a 3-year curriculum.
  - Future research should compare nontraditional students' experiences between different cohorts.
  - Longitudinal studies of nontraditional students throughout their time in an OT educational program would yield deeper insights into their experiences.
- Study was limited to a single institutional type using a small cohort with limited student diversity.
  - Future research should compare nontraditional students' experiences across institutional types, cohort sizes, and demographic characteristics.
- Data analysis was limited to a single researcher.
  - Qualitative methodology is strengthened when multiple perspectives are incorporated into the data analysis process to reduce researcher bias.

### **Implications for Practice for OT Educators**

The Model of College Outcomes for Adults is useful for OT educators who have nontraditional students in their classrooms. The recommendations below are beneficial for ALL types of students, but they may have a particularly positive impact on the educational experiences of nontraditional students:

- Begin with a Mutual Expectations Activity the first time you have a new cohort of students (anonymous written response or in small group discussion):
  - What are your biggest concerns about being in this program?
  - What characteristics do you appreciate in an instructor?
  - What instructional strategies do you prefer?
  - When required to do group work, what characteristics or behaviors do you appreciate in other group members? What characteristics or behaviors do you find irritating?
  - Follow-up PowerPoint with class discussion
- Use informal questionnaires to learn more about students' prior experiences, personal biographies, and current life situations. If feasible, follow up with a brief email to each student. (Takes about 1.5 to 2 hours for a class of 30 students.) Alternatively, compile a brief PowerPoint highlighting the diversity of the class.
  - What is your hometown?
  - Where do you live now?
  - What was your K-12 education like? (Private/public/homeschool; GED vs. high school diploma; size of graduating class)
  - Are you currently working? If so, where & how many hours per week?
  - Are you currently involved in any campus or community activities / organizations?
  - What kind of leisure activities do you enjoy?
  - Anything you would like to share about your family or close friends? Ex: Married, children, significant other, roommates, pets
  - One interesting or unique fact about you?

- Have students complete Values Clarification exercises and then anonymously compile the results for the class.
  - Begin with a list of 20 values (Ex: Love, health, faith, family, friendship, financial security, happiness, loyalty, etc.)
    - Narrow it down to your Top 10, then your Top 5, then Top 3
  - Anonymous tally of Top 3 values in class
    - Follow up PowerPoint, discussion of diversity within classroom
  - Additional resources for similar activities:
    - <http://www.chenetwork.org/westafrican/files/Values%20and%20HIV/Values%20Clarification%20Exercises.pdf>
    - [http://www.education.ucsb.edu/webdata/instruction/hss/Values\\_Clarification/ValueClarif\\_Method\\_Outline.pdf](http://www.education.ucsb.edu/webdata/instruction/hss/Values_Clarification/ValueClarif_Method_Outline.pdf)
    - <http://www2.sfasu.edu/advising/VALUES%20CLARIFICATION%20EXERCISE.pdf>
- Purpose statement for every assignment – Why is it important and how does it relate to the student’s future career? Nontraditional students in particular like to understand *why* they are learning something.
  - Example from an assignment on interviewing a parent:
 

***Purpose of Assignment:*** While this course focuses on child development and assessment, it is also important to understand the parents and caregivers with whom you will be working. You need to have an understanding of the occupational profile, routines, and responsibilities of the child’s parent or caregiver. It is critical that you demonstrate the ability to develop a rapport with parents and caregivers because they will have a much greater impact on the child than any direct services that you will provide. While you as the OT have a distinct area of expertise, the parent / caregiver will always be a greater expert on the child you are assessing.
- Provide clear expectations regarding assignment requirements and due dates so students can plan other aspects of their lives around academic deadlines.
- If possible, allow some assignments to be completed at a student’s own pace over the course of the semester. Many nontraditional students will work ahead early in the semester to allow more time for balancing other deadlines later in the semester.
- Limit outside group work by allowing time in class for group meetings and scheduling a few “work days” into the course schedule to allow students to meet outside of class.
- Send an occasional email or schedule a brief meeting to check in on how nontraditional students are coping.
- Offer to introduce nontraditional students to students from other cohorts who share similar characteristics, particularly if a given cohort has only one or two nontraditional students.
- Midterm Course Evaluation
  - Two questions
    - What is going well in this course?
    - What specific suggestions do you have for the instructor that would help you with learning the material in this course?

- Possible methods
  - Anonymous electronic – Survey Monkey, Blackboard, etc.
  - Or small group discussions facilitated by another faculty member, preferably not from your own department so students will be candid in responses
- Follow-up discussion
  - 1 or 2 things that you can change during the current course
  - Recognition of suggestions that may be incorporated into future courses, but are not feasible for the current semester
  - Justification of why you cannot or will not change certain aspects of teaching the course

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